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NABOB NED; or, The Secret of Slab City.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "DENVER DOLL" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.



"I'LL CUT YOUR HEART OUT!" AND THE BLADE WAS DESCENDING WHEN SPERRA'S ARM WAS CAUGHT BY ONE MAN'S RIGHT-HAND GRASP.

Nabob Ned;

OR,
THE SECRET OF SLAB CITY.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," NOVELS, "DENVER DOLL," NOVELS, "SIERRA SAM,"
"YREKA JIM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A PLACE FOR RENT.

"FOR RENT!"

"These premises will be rented cheap to a good, responsible tenant, who has the courage of a lion, the gall of a side-show fakir, and the strength of a Hercules. No other than one answering to the above description need apply."

"NABOB NED,
Slab City,
Mon."

A characteristic sign it was, considering all circumstances.

Twenty miles from Heron station, on the Northern Pacific R. R., which is considered the nearest point of ingress to the Cœur d'Alene mining region from Montana Territory—located deep down in a gulch with lofty pine-crowned walls towering above, is Slab City.

Geological surveys never did anything for the place—never will.

A wild-cat enthusiast from "up-country," with more saw-mill than geographical knowledge, awoke one morning in the full belief that the place was on the line of the direct route to Eagle City and there was a little fortune there, gaping for some one to gobble up.

This man, for the sake of reverence we have for the elephant he had on his hands, we will call John Smith; he had a barrel of money, a hogshead of conceit, and a little experience; with these he started out to build Slab City. He moved his tools down from Plainville—the tools consisting of the only split saw, boiler and engine in that immediate portion of the Territory, five mill hands, a dog and a burro-load of sleeping material—and began work.

The one redeeming quality of Smith was that he was chock-full of ambition, and as a result of his combined ambition and enthusiasm, the tall pines began to "drop," and in a short space of time both cabins and shanties began to loom up, and Slab City had its start.

When the accommodations for population had shaped up to something like a couple of score or more of abodes—it occurred to Smith that he had better begin to boom the place, in order to attract some "summer boarders," before the next fall of snow came—those eternal snows, for which the Cœur d'Alene region is noted.

So Smith opened his heart, and likewise his "bar'l," and the result of an ingenious amount of "flushing," was a stampede.

The people came—of the wild, feverish sort, that make up the population of every mushroom mining-city, which is enough to say of them, at present.

Mr. Smith occupied a cabin, that was both residence and office. Here, he had on exhibition specimens of gold, in the way of nuggets and dust, which he claimed to have taken out of the gulch, in various places—and Mr. Smith had both claims to sell, and houses to rent.

In fact, for awhile, he did a flourishing business, and coined money.

Many disgusted mortals putting out of Eagle City, wandered over to Slab City, while part of the influx to the first-named place, unfortunately green as to the "white elephant camp," were induced to try Slab City first.

For a couple of weeks, Slab City filled up in a way that should have made its founder feel proud but for the fact that he had a guilty conscience, and, maybe, a foreboding of coming trouble.

Had he been possessed of the average sense of a burro, he would have folded his tent and stolen away.

But he didn't.

Day by day, he sat in his office and listened to the rattle of cash, as Nabob Ned took it in.

Nabob Ned was a "scholar," from the East, whom Mr. John Smith had hired to handle his cash, and keep the kinks out of his accounts.

Day by day sanguine miners delved and prospected throughout Slab City gulch, and nightly their expressions of dissatisfaction grew louder and louder.

Finally, one of John Smith's mill-hands, who had been with Smith from the time of his arrival, was visited in the dead of night by a dele-

gation of indignant miners, and requested, at the point of the pistol, to divulge any little stray facts he might possess.

He was not one of the most stubbornly heroic men in the world, and the persuasive inducements offered him, to be confidential, had the desired effect.

He narrated how Smith had really dug the auriferous specimens which he had exhibited from different parts of the gulch, but he had first planted them there. To insure the success of his town, he had flushed it, at several thousand dollars expense, and recaptured a part of the "plant," leaving the rest to be found by the sanguine fortune hunters.

It was a very cute, although not original scheme, on the part of Smith; but, owing to the lack of proper early training, this delegation of miners failed to appreciate Smith's cleverness, and they waited upon him in short order, and hung him to a limb of the sighing pine, some of whose branches swept the roof of his cabin.

Nabob Ned was then persuaded to hand over Smith's cash, and then was apprised that he and Slab City could go to the Antipodes.

After which proceedings the delegation "ambled."

This was a part of the early history of Slab City; but not all, for there remains much, yet, to be told.

Nabob Ned, with an eye to business, closed the Smith cabin, and nailed the simple sign of "For Rent" to the door. Assisted by some of the more humane citizens, he cut down Smith's body before it was yet cold, and planted it, at the side of the cabin, which, by the way, stood on the outskirts of the camp. Full three feet of earth did they put over Smith's remains, with the evident intention of making him "stay thar."

But, Smith, practically speaking, "didn't stay worth a cent"—at least, so it was asserted.

The circumstances warranting this assertion, were somewhat after the following order:

Nabob Ned having removed to the Bung-Eye Hotel, kept by Bung-Eye Jake, was waited on by a party, who introduced himself as Scotty Shannon, of 'Shian.

Scotty was a ponderous, broad-chested individual, who looked equal to annihilating an iced-dozen of dapper little fellows like Nabob Ned, but, instead of being of the blustering order of humans Scotty appeared to have been reared in the lap of good-nature, if not luxury,

"You have a shebang to let, up hyer, I see," he said to Ned, tackling business at once.

"A sheb'ng we have," Ned hastened to assent, taking out a form of blank leases. "It is a little palace in its way, and the former proprietor, having just passed in his coupons, the place is to let. Would you believe it, sir, I have already had numerous applications for the house?"

"Why haven't ye let 'er then?" Scotty demanded, regarding the agent, in the light of a confirmed liar.

"Oh! because they were not responsible parties. Whoever takes the place, must take it for a year, and come down with spot cash, in advance?"

"And, why, thusly?"

"Because I am so pressed with business, that I cannot be bothered with the palace."

"Of what did the former proprietor shuffle, may I inquire?"

"Oh, cert'! He died of a throat affection, brought on by wearing too tight a collar, made of hemp."

"Ah! Did he kick, particularly, or threaten ter wander back ag'in?"

"Oh, no; not a kick or threat."

"You yourself planted him?"

"Oh, you bet!—planted him in Prayer Book order, right near the shebang."

"How deep?"

"Three feet, at least, and well ballasted, with stone."

"What's the taxation?"

"Well, I'll tell you; you seem like a pretty straight sort of hairpin—I'll put you up and label you, at two hundred, for the whole year, which is dirt cheap!"

"Taken!" Mr. Scotty Shannon agreed, depositing the required sum in Ned's hands. "Just give me the key, and I'll take a look at the ranch, before I take possession wi' my wife an' darter!"

The key was only too willingly handed over, and "the lucre" corralled by Ned.

Scotty took his departure.

Within half an hour, he returned.

He laid the key upon the table over which he had recently paid the money, and beside the

key a "six," which had the appearance of looking for something to do.

"Well, sir, did the place suit you?" Ned ventured to inquire, secretly wondering how Mr. Shannon came by a fresh bruise alongside his nose.

"Yas, et suits me—to let alone," was the reply. "Young man, yer early trainin' has been sadly neglected; ye'r a liar, a thief and a fraud, and fer six cents' worth of soap-grease I'll swallow ye whole."

"Great Heaven! what's the matter?" the agent demanded, fearing instant annihilation.

"What's gone wrong?"

"Wrong?" echoed Scotty, tragically—"wrong? Did you not declare ter me that ye planted him three fut deep, an' put stun on him in the bargain?"

"I'll swear to it, and can furnish ample proof, sir!"

"Then ye'd better go an' do ther job over. As a high kicker he aire great, as you kin see by ther bruise on my cheek-bone. Young man, I don't hanker after that aire shebang, but I do want back my money. So the quicker you fork it over, the more years you will hev ter live. Come down!"

Nabob Ned did not hesitate.

There was cardinal red in Mr. Shannon's eye, and the two hundred dollars were returned with a promptness that seemed to establish Mr. Ned's business capacity.

Mr. Shannon then departed.

He did not even take one lingering, regretful, backward look at John Smith's executor, but marched with the air of a man who was highly content.

After he was gone, Nabob Ned summoned those citizens who had assisted in planting Mr. Smith, and related Mr. Scotty Shannon's averred experience.

As a result, a visit and investigation were decided upon, and the party set out for the cabin at the early edge of evening.

When they arrived within a few yards of it, the door was discovered to be standing wide open, while in the doorway stood the cadaver of John Smith, erect and without support, other than that furnished by the rigid limbs.

Fastened to his breast was the sign which had been nailed to the door:

"FOR RENT."

Smith's corpse was re-buried, and then a new sign was put up—that mentioned at the beginning of our narrative.

CHAPTER II.

A TIMELY RESCUE.

THE sign was allowed to remain upon the door of John Smith's former abode; nor did his remains again wander from their proper place of repose.

But the odor of mystery clung about the cabin, and it was declared haunted.

This fact did not deter others than Scotty Shannon from trying at tenancy.

Repeated tests were made by bold daredevils, who sought notoriety; but in each case, the tester gave up the job, satisfied that the supernatural possessed the cabin.

In the mean time, within a couple of weeks after the first manifestations, it was discovered that gold in paying quantities really did exist in the gulch, and that, after all, Slab City's success was not likely to prove a delusion.

Stock went booming, and the fever broke out anew, brightening many countenances that had before been clouded and fierce, and tripling the receipts of the drinking-bars within a day's time.

Now that the prospects of the camp were again "'way up in G," the town was a buzz of excitement and hilarity, and general good fellowship reigned among the rough crowd.

The miners got their tools in working order; the gamblers rubbed their hands in expectation of replenishing their crushed pocket-books.

The saw-mill resumed work, and new dwellings began to shoot up, in anticipation of a renewed rush, and Nabob Ned once more reigned as one of the most important individuals in the camp, from the fact that he claimed the late John Smith property, by right of being formerly Smith's right-hand man, and no one stood ready to dispute his right.

A dapper little individual was Nabob Ned, with spindling legs, and shoulders not remarkable for their promise of strength. From all appearances, Nature must have designed him for a dry-goods clerk, or some other light vocation, since he was not muscular and imposing of appearance, nor had he as yet shown any exhibitions of belligerancy and grit.

He was what a lady might call pretty—a pretty dude—and with his graceful mustache, center-shot hair, and ever careful regard to the arrangement of his attire, won the appellation of "Nabob"—making him Nabob Ned.

The Bung-Eye Hotel was Nabob Ned's headquarters, and when he was not otherwise occupied he could generally be found at the faro or poker-tables, where he was considered pretty lucky.

"Stud-horse poker" reigned as the favorite game, and his honor, Mr. Ned—his other name, he claimed, was Roosevelt—was an adept at the game, and consequently seldom lost.

One wild, wet evening, when the rain poured down ceaselessly, and the thunder fairly made the dwellings of Slab City dance upon their foundations, Nabob Ned sat at one of the numerous tables in the Bung-Eye, opposite a wiry, dark-visaged individual, with black curling hair and mustache, who looked as if he might be of Mexican descent.

This Mexican, Pedro Sperra, had a considerable pile of gold and greenbacks before him, while Nabob Ned had none.

"Play again, señor!" he said, in a soft voice. "Never get discouraged at so slight a loss."

"Discouraged?" and Ned uttered a sarcastic laugh. "Well, I hardly believe I'm the one to get discouraged. But, you see, I'm not exactly the fool you take me to be. I might play here with you all night without winning a pot; or if I won a pot, it would be because you choose to let me do so, in order to draw me on."

"Ha! Why so? You do not mean to cast any insinuations, I trust," and Sperra's eyes flashed.

"You can take it that way, if you choose," Ned replied. "I have said I will play you no more, because, no matter how good a player I might be, I would stand no show with you!"

"But, hold on, sir. You mistake the sort of gentleman you are talking to. A man had better say out to me just what he means in plain words, rather than to dodge about in hints—it will be far better for him!"

"That matters not to me. If you feel disposed to take exceptions to what I said, do so. It matters very little to me whether you do, or do not."

Sperra uttered a snarl of impatience.

"If you retract, all right. I accept your silence as an apology for your cowardice!" he said, pointedly, and in a way that elicited a broad smile from the several bystanders, whom the little bout of words had brought to the spot.

The smile, perhaps, more than the open insult, caused an angry flush to suffuse young Roosevelt's face.

"See here, confound your impudence!" he cried fiercely. "You want to pick a fuss, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I am perfectly willing to accommodate you," Sperra replied, calmly. "You insinuated that I had won your money by unfair manipulation of the cards. I retaliated by suggesting that you were a coward. I repeat the epithet: you are a coward among cowards!"

Probably Pedro Sperra became forcible in his speech because he believed that Nabob Ned was a coward and would submit to insult without fighting.

Then, too, the wily Mexican who was evidently a man of education, wanted to make an impression upon the Slab Cityites from the start, which would give him further prestige as a "solid" man.

But it so happened that he missed his calculations, for Nabob Ned leaped lightly upon the table, and with his right foot administered a kick upon the gambler's jaw, which elicited a howl of pain and rage from him.

In leaping backward from the table, Nabob stumbled over a chair and went crashing to the floor. Ere he could arise, Pedro Sperra had left the table, a glittering knife in his grasp, and was upon his fallen partner-at-cards.

"You accursed Yank!" he hissed, clutching Ned by the throat with one hand and raising the knife with the other; "I'll cut your heart out!" and the blade was descending when Sperra's arm was caught by one man's right-hand grasp.

The same grasp raised the Mexican off of Nabob Ned, and stood him squarely on his feet—the whole operation being performed without a word spoken.

And who was this timely rescuer?

It was a question no one could answer.

He was not a giant—indeed, was about a half-head taller than the Mexican, and there were a score of bigger men in the room than he.

And aside from the fact that he was rather good-looking, as the faces of men go, there was nothing particularly striking about his appearance.

He had a decidedly firm cast of countenance, an eagle-gray eye, and a pleasant mouth, ornamented with two rows of pearly teeth. His hair he wore in a wavy mass, that rippled back over his shoulders; a mustache, brown, like his hair, and a slight imperial, added to his good looks; but, his garments were ragged, and literally covered with mud. Consisting of stogy boots, breeches, woolen shirt and corduroy jacket, they had not originally cost a fortune, but now looked as if they had seen hard service; while the slouch sombrero upon his head had been beautifully riddled with buckshot. In lieu of a weapon-belt, a leather bridle-strap was fastened around his waist, but no weapons were there to set it off.

And this was the man—not over twenty-five years of age—who had picked Pedro Sperra up, and stood him on his feet, with as much apparent ease as though the Mexican had been a mere boy.

"Thar! stand!" the new-comer admonished, "What war ye tryin' to git thru' yerself, Greaser?"

"Caramba! I'll show you! I'll have your life for this!" Sperra hissed, not deigning, however, to raise the knife, for, indeed he was powerless to move the hand in which it was clutched. "I'll cut your accursed heart out!"

"I'mbettin' ye'r wrong!" the stranger retorted, good-naturedly. "You're the most harmless Greaser I ever saw. Git up, young feller! What's the matter of you?"

Nabob Ned had raised himself to a sitting position, and was taking in the scene, his face depicting his surprise.

"Oh! there is not much the matter with me," he replied, "except that we had a little dispute about cards and the Mexican called me a coward. I kicked him on the jaw, and stumbled, in getting off the table. He mounted me then, and was near knifing me, I reckon!"

"Not so near as he would have liked to be!" and the young rescuer eyed Sperra sharply. "I hain't no purickler love fer Greasers, myself, an' especially this hyer bud, Pedro Sperra!"

"How do you know me?" the Mexican growled, suspiciously.

"Jest ther same's a boss knows oats—only, a leetle different. I've got a claim ag'in' yer life, me chrome-yaller snoozer, but, jest at present, I'll not make a levy. There, now! See that ye don't come no more monkey bizness around hyer, ag'in."

He released his iron grasp upon the gambler's arm, at the same time speaking a few quick words in the Spanish language, which were unintelligible to any of the bystanders.

Sperra glared back at him, a moment, defiantly, the venom of rancorous hatred in his glance; then, turning abruptly, he pushed his way through the crowd, and disappeared.

It became plain to all, then, that the stranger of the iron arm had some power over the Mexican, which Sperra dared not resist—a fact that excited a new element of curiosity among the citizens of Slab City.

CHAPTER III.

EAGLE CITY ED—THE CHALLENGE.

The stranger at once became a favorite. Those sunburnt veterans of the mines, were pretty accurate critics, in their way, and they at once "sized" the stranger as "every inch a man, and sharp as a steel-trap."

It was not until an hour or two after his appearance within the precincts of the Bung-Eye that his name became known.

Then, too, it might have remained unknown but for the fact that an inquisitive mule-driver, from Mariposa broached the subject, by slapping him on the shoulder and facing him around to the bar.

"Nominate ver p'izen, stranger, an' tip us yer handle. I'm Big Boots, ther terror from Eagle City, an' chock-full o' narve an' electricity, an' et strikes me on the temple that I've gazed upon yer alabaster visage afore!"

A ponderous fellow, this mule-driver, immense of girth, and as dirty and seedy as you often meet 'em, out in the mountains. His whiskers had once been dark, but had been bleached, by sun and rain, and the same might be said of his hair; while, as for his mouth, it might easily have answered the purpose of two. The end of his nose was one mass of seed warts. His feet were incased in a pair of boots larger than the largest stogies in the room, and it seemed evident that he must have derived his title from their size.

The young stranger eyed him a moment, curiously; then, laughed:

"Well, now, I allow you've got cheek!" he declared. "As if a good-lookin' feller like me, could ever be known by a high-minded individual like you. By the way, however, faint and dim in my recollection aire a shadow—a mere ordinary shadder, w'ot luks like you. I'm frum Eagle City, myself, an' when they try ter catch me wi' good squar' bait, they ginerally allow they're fishin' fer Eagle City Ed—which aire my name. Now, we'll obliterate our sorrows."

The drink was bad, and Eagle City Ed turned around, facing the crowd, and with his elbows leaning on the bar, looked the assemblage over with a curious scrutiny.

"Yas, pilgrims," he finally said, "I'm frum Eagle City. Mebbe ye hev judged that same, by the broad-cloth I wear. I have left Eagle City with many sad regrets—that I hed never seen et—an' ef that's any o' you wanter go inside distemper paintin' a la Doctor Tanner, there's vacancies thar for one or two more. I tell ye, I went in like er lion an' slid out on me lamb-like uppers. An' now, as I behold yer smilin' visages, I realize more fullsomely what chances in life I've lost—chances fer bread an' bacon. You will excuse me, gents, ef my auburn-haired remarks approach ther ragged edge o' sarcasm, but, ye see, I'm broke wuss'n ther egg w'ot ther elephant stepped on. Ther hydra-headed orthinological beast, hunger, has consumed the entire machinery of my interior man, an' I kin even now feel him tryin' ter gnaw off my suspender buttons. Ef some galoot, or galoots, wi' more lucre than sense, will march up ter ther manger, and contribute a few sovereigns toward buying me a monument—of grub—ye shall ever hev ther muscular thanks of yer flat-fatted friend, Eagle City Edward."

With the ease of a side show blower, did the strange combination of muscle and waggishness deliver himself of this harangue; then taking off his bullet-riddled hat, he held it out for the reception of alms.

For a full minute the bystanders stared at him, as if deliberating whether they should open their hearts or not; then, a man stepped forward, and in passing the sport without looking at him, dropped a five-dollar gold-piece into the hat.

And this man was—Pedro Sperra.

Eagle City Ed's face manifested no surprise further than a sort of humorous contraction about his mouth.

The crowd looked even more puzzled than he. "Boyees, der ye see?" broke in Big Boots. "Aire ye goin' ter let er durned Greaser git ahead o' ye? Not fer Sarah Jane! Hyer's a gold V, w'ot come to me, while on a spree, an' cuss'd be we, ef I don't give et to heel!" and the gold-piece was flipped dexterously into the air, and dropped alongside the other one, in the hat.

Big Boots's action was a signal for others of the bystanders to show their liberality, and the coins, large and small in denomination, flowed freely into the hat, until nearly every man in the room, except Nabob Ned, had contributed something.

"Come, Nabob, ain't ye goin' ter do something?" a miner cried. "You orter, fer you're better able ter do it than ary man of us!"

Nabob Ned stood leaning against the bar, regarding his late rescuer with an uninterpretable stare.

He started at being asked for alms, and thrust his hand down into his pocket.

"Sorry, gents, but I just lost my last red to the 'cursed Mexican,' he said, slowly and deliberately. "What other money I possess does not belong to me, but to the estate of John Smith. Heirs may come along, some day, to claim it."

"Bah!"

"Nonsense."

"That's a nice way ter squeeze out o' et!"

"Too thin!"

"Ye orter go soak yer head!"

"Nabob Ned fer gratitude, every time!"

Such and other expressions of disgust escaped the lips of the miners, causing a vivid flush to come over the agent's face.

He saw that the arrival of Eagle City Ed was more than likely to swamp his own prestige unless he did something to keep his footing among them.

"You are unjust, gentlemen!" he said, bowing. "I am very grateful to the gentleman from Eagle City for saving my life, and you may rest assured he shall not go unrewarded. Being out of cash, I'll do the next best thing."

"What's that? what's that?" a dozen voices interrogated, eagerly.

"This. Eagle City Ed appears to be a man of nerve. If he will remain over one night in John Smith's haunted cabin, in the morning I'll deed the property to him as his own."

A murmur of surprise escaped the lips of the bystanders.

What was the object of this strange proposal?

Was it to test the courage of the man from Eagle City?

Was it with a hope that the mystery would be cleared up?—or—

Was it done because Nabob Ned was a little jealous of this new arrival?

The crowd wondered.

Nabob Ned looked a trifle triumphant.

Eagle City Ed emptied his hat of the donation that had been given him.

"I am werry much oblige to all who have responded so generously to my appeal!" he said, bowing; "an' now, ef you've got any ghost rackets hyer in Slab City, an' I kin rope in a roof, by sittin' up an' talkin' politics wi' ther ghosts, that hits me a crack right whar I live. Yas, sir, me noble bud, ef ye hev a cabin as won't hold me till mornin', why ther quicker we get down ter bizness the better. I hain't had a good scrap wi' a thoroughbred ghost since Mary come home!"

"Very well, sir; I am as good as my word," Nabob Ned said, a twinkle in his eye. "Come along!"

And the entire crowd were soon on their way toward John Smith's cabin.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ARCH PLOTTER.

IT was not such a night as ghost-hunters might be expected to favor. The wind blew fiercely through the gulch, the lightning flashed spitefully from crag to crag, and the thunder pounded away at the gates of heaven with sullen roar.

As for the rain, it fell in volumes, the wind whirling and twisting it into fury, as it beat against all obstacles.

If there were any ghosts in Slab City, such a night they might choose for their revels.

The crowd that left the Bung-Eye for John Smith's cabin, numbered fully two-score, with Eagle City Ed, Big Boots, and Nabob Ned in the lead.

The former seemed to pay little attention to the warring of the elements, but strode along with a quick step.

"Ugh! Darn my bosomy ef this hyer ain't a blizzardous night!" Big Boots grunted. "It beats ther Dutch how she do pour."

"It's such nights as this that supernatural visitants hold their fandangoes, I reckon!" Nabob Ned suggested, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"You bet!" the young man from Eagle City replied. "It was such a night as this that I got locked in a house down in Mexico and had the opportunity of seeing a ghost-dance. Thar were thirty on 'em, and every one hed evidently been a young senorita in her time. Talk about ther artistic dancin' o' yer Saratoga gals—why et waran't a circumstance. Ther ghostesses war gliders, you bet, wi' now and then a high-kicker, who would kindly kick my hat off wi' the toe of her golden slipper. Et war a hot night, but them floaters kept waltzin' around till et war cooler'n an automatic fan could make it."

"Spect ye must hev hed a tech of the bug, eh?" Big Boots suggested.

"Nary! Hadn't touched a drap fer a month. Oh! they were ther genywine article. Arter they war done dancin', ye orter seen 'em set out ther lunch. We had quail on toast, oysters an' champagne—an' ye jest orter see em open champagne! Every durn cork tuk me plum on ther end o' my proboscis, until et got as red as a blushin' lob—"

"Look! look!" Nabob Ned fairly screamed, pointing ahead.

There was a vivid glare of lightning, that seemed to last for several seconds—long enough at any rate for the crowd to behold a sight that startled them, and caused them to stop in their tracks.

It was a sight, too, calculated to startle those even of the strongest nerves.

Just ahead of them, not over a dozen yards, stood the cabin of the late lamented John Smith.

The door was wide open, and standing upright and erect in the doorway, without visible support, was the ghastly-faced corpse of Smith himself, with the sign "For Rent," affixed to his breast.

This much the crowd saw in that vivid glare of heaven's pyrotechnics; then, all was blank, intense darkness.

Motionless and speechless the miners waited for a repetition of the lightning-flash, and after a lapse of several minutes they were rewarded.

Tuey plainly saw the cabin; but the door was closed as usual, and the sign nailed upon it.

A dry laugh burst from the lips of Eagle City Ed, as the flash expired, leaving naught but blankness again.

"What are you laughing at?" Nabob Ned demanded, fiercely.

"Why, at you galoots gettin' skeered at sight o' an ordinary good-natured lookin' cabin!" Ed replied, dryly.

"Cabin?" Nabob echoed. "D'y'e mean to tell us you didn't see old Smith's corpse standin' in ther doorway, at ther first flash o' lightnin'?"

"Nothin' o' the sort. You fellers must have been optically deluded, or else bad whisky is gittin' in its work on you!"

"You're a liar if you say ye didn't see ther cadaver in ther doorway!" a miner boldly asserted, and the others of the crowd gave audible approval to his declaration.

But, Eagle City Ed only laughed again.

"Say what you like, gents. This 'ere feller yecall Nabob Ned seemed desirous of testing my nerve, and I accepted his proposal. If he will kindly give me the key to the cabin, I'll go over and turn in for the night, for I am slightly subject to malaria, and this rain ain't very pleasant!"

Nobby Ned sneered.

"Talk is cheap!" he declared. "You know money couldn't hire you to sleep in the place."

"Not? Why, I am surprised at yer opine about me. Judge you would be afeard to, from what you say."

Nabob bit his lip, and remained silent.

"Oh! of course I understand your failing," Ed said, dryly. "But, you see, I was built of different timber. I'm goin' ter rest my weary shanks in that aire shebang, you bet—not only fer ter-night but fer gud. Give us ther key!"

"The door is not locked," Nabob growled. "Go ahead wi' yer ark, an' ye can bet we'll see that ye stay in thar till morning, too. If you attempt to sneak out you'll get filled with five pounds of cold lead."

"All right. Hot lead would kinder work in better sech a wet night as this, but suit yerself. Won't I laugh at you guys out hyer in ther rain, while I, like a king in my castle, am bein' entertained by white winged cherubs! By-by! See you later!"

And the man from Eagle City strode toward the cabin, over which hung a pall of superstitions dread.

Eagerly the men of Slab City craned their heads, and endeavored to follow the outlines of his figure, with their gaze; but the darkness was so intense that when but a few feet away they entirely lost sight of him.

For only a moment, however. A flash of lightning again lit up the scene.

Eagle City Ed was within five feet of the cabin, the door of which stood wide open, and the cadaver of John Smith occupied the aperture as before!

A second flash, almost immediately afterward, revealed the cadaver as having disappeared, and Eagle City Ed standing in the doorway, triumphantly waving his hat.

Although a man seldom given to profanity, Nabob Ned now uttered a fierce malediction.

"Curse the fellow!" he gritted; "he's got the nerve of a boa-constrictor!"

"An', by ther cavortin' cats o' Charleston, ye'r out a cabin!" declared the mule-driver from Mariposa. "I ked hev told ye the chap war no slouch fer ter bluff. You bet he remains in thar ranch all night, an' ef thar's any disembodied stiffs cuttin' up monkey-shines he'll join in the racket!"

Nabob uttered something that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle.

"Maybe!" he said. "If you men want to stay here and keep watch till mornin', I'll give you five dollars apiece when you come off duty. I'm goin' back to the Bung-Eye, where it is dryer."

About a dozen of the crowd accepted the offer—roughs, who realized with satisfaction just how much "bug-juice," or chance at the faro-bank, the little five would give them.

The remainder accompanied Nabob Ned back to the saloon.

Nabob was plainly in a bad humor. Usually gay and full of spirit, he now appeared surly and ill-tempered.

Before going to the hotel, he disappeared in the darkness; but when he seated himself in

the brilliantly-lighted saloon, and counted over a roll of bills, he had several thousand dollars.

"I am not broke in my own right y^t," he muttered; "and if I don't make Slab City too hot for this Eagle City Ed, it will be a wonder to me."

He sat for some moments in sullen silence; then spying Pedro Sperra across the room, he beckoned to him.

After a moment's hesitation the Mexican approached, his face bearing none too good natured an expression.

"Well," he demanded, pausing by the table, "what do you want?"

"Sit down!" Nabob ordered. "I want to talk with you."

"What about?"

"That you will learn as we proceed. Sit down!"

The Mexican obeyed, watching the young man as though suspicious of mischief.

"Now, then," Nabob said, "to begin with, we will draw a veil over what happened this evening, and talk business of a different character. You know this new chap, Eagle City Ed?"

"What of it?"

"Much, perhaps. You know him, and while you cordially hate him, you also fear him?" Sperra scowled but made no answer.

"You see I have observed that much," Nabob went on, "and have deduced therefrom the fact that you would feel more at ease if this gent from Eagle City were not so numerous."

The Mexican showed his white teeth in a significant smile.

"Perhaps you are right," he assented; "but no harm must come to him. I would protect him from harm, at the peril of my own life."

The other looked puzzled.

The Mexican hated the stranger, and yet stood ready to espouse his cause!

What did it mean?

"Indeed!" ejaculated the Nabob. "Why is it thus? You are enemies, are you not?"

"If so, it can matter but little to you. If enemies, we will not fight."

"Excuse me, but I think you are a crank. Eagle City Ed is a hard customer, and would think no more of cutting your throat than he would that of a bullock. I hate the fellow more than I ever hated any other person in my life. He is a thorn in my path, and must be removed, regardless of cost."

"Why don't you remove him, then?"

And the Mexican smiled, sneeringly.

"Because I don't want to have anything to do with him."

"Because, like myself, you are afraid of him!" Sperra declared, with a diabolical grin.

"No! no! Let Eagle City Ed alone, as long as he does not molest you. He is a python; if you arouse him he will crush you!"

"Bah! there are better men than he, and even I do not fear him. As I said before, he is in my way, and must be removed. The sooner the better. Do you think he will remain in the haunted cabin all night?"

"Without a doubt. He fears neither man nor spirit. You see, I know of him, while to you he is a stranger."

"Perhaps he is a stranger!" Nabob Ned returned, significantly; "and perhaps not. Sperra, you are a rascal. Don't feel insulted because I compliment you, for your very looks give you away, and you ought to feel proud to be so easily distinguished from the common herd. You are here in Slab City to make, not to break. Am I not right?"

"You are."

"Of course, the more you make the better it will suit you. If you can earn a thousand dollars as easy as by turning over your hand, do you suppose for an instant you will allow the opportunity to pass you by?"

The Mexican's eyes glistened for a minute; then, he laughed, lightly.

"Why, I can sit down at a gambling-table and make more than that in a single night!" he declared.

"Hardly!" Nabob Ned replied, compressing his lips, when he realized only too keenly that he had lost twelve hundred dollars but a short time before. "All players are not so tame as I was. Come now, I'll strike a bargain with you. At daylight, to-morrow morning, this Eagle City Ed will leave the cabin. He will be one of the triumphant, and one of the popular, men of Slab City. That must not be—I swear it shall not be! When he leaves that cabin, a man concealed in the bushes, some distance away, can drop him, with a rifle, and no one will be the wiser as to who did the job. See?"

"You map it out plain enough so far as talk is concerned; but, planning and executing, are two different things."

"Pooh! pshaw! What is the use of wasting breath on 'ifs' and 'ands'. I'll tell you just what I'll do: You secrete yourself and put a bullet through Eagle City Ed's heart to-morrow morning, and I'll give you two thousand dollars immediately after satisfying myself that he is dead!"

"No!" Sperra said, coolly. "It is you who have been wasting breath. I told you before no harm should come to Eagle City Ed, through my agency. You will have to get some one else to do your bloody work, senor!"

And bowing obsequiously, the Mexican turned away, leaving Nabob Ned in a fearful rage over the defeat of his evil purpose.

CHAPTER V. IN THE CABIN.

THE last the awed and wondering miners had seen of Eagle City Ed, was by the aid of the lightning flash which had revealed him standing in the doorway of the cabin waving his hat at them.

The next flash the door was closed and the adventurer had vanished.

Let us follow, now, the adventures of the cool head from Eagle City.

He had seen the cadaver in the doorway and the succeeding events had been a matter of no little wonderment to him; but that only inspired him to further investigation, so he strode resolutely toward the cabin-door, and when the apparition once more confronted him he was within a few feet of it.

He saw that there was nothing earthly about it, because, from his close proximity, he could look directly through and beyond the body. It was nothing more or less than—what?

Evidently it was a shadow that filled the doorway, but it bore the shape and features of a corpse, said corpse being, as declared by the miners, what John Smith had been, in life.

Determined to explode the mystery, he stepped quickly forward, but the apparition vanished as mysteriously as it had appeared, and he found himself the undisputed occupant of the doorway, while the door remained wide open.

Waving his hat to the crowd, he disappeared within the cabin.

To close and bar the door, was but the work of a moment, and he found himself in Stygian darkness.

Overhead, the rain poured down on the roof, which, in a measure, was welcome music, considering the situation.

The first, and most important thing, was a little light on the subject, but a careful search through his clothes, failed to produce any matches.

"Nary a match! I orter tho't o' that, when I was up at ther saloon. I'm bound to remain in this ghost shebang without any glim, that's certain. Tain't ther most comfortable thing to do, but Edward will try it a whirl."

The cabin was of good size, and the interior as well as Eagle City Ed could judge, was in one large apartment.

The only windows were, like the door, on the front side, and these were guarded by close shutters, so that, even in daytime, little light struggled into the cabin.

Finding himself without means of striking a light, the sport was nonplussed. He might go blundering blindly about the cabin, with the result of stirring up something immensely to his disadvantage; so concluded to remain where he was for the present.

"This is a wuss fix than I anticipated!" he muttered, growing uneasy. "Durn my skin, ef 'twasn't fer the rain, I'd mosey!"

A peculiar, scratching noise in a distant corner just then caused him to listen with eagerness and anxiety.

Drawing a weapon, and crouching upon foot and knee, he waited further developments.

The scratching sound continued but a moment; then some heavy object struck the door and fell to the slab floor.

Ed leveled his revolver in the direction whence had come the scratching noise and fired two shots in quick succession; but there was no answer to the reports of the weapon.

Five minutes passed, but there were no further "manifestations."

"Reckon mebbe I must have dropped the brick-bat thrower," was Eagle City Ed's comment, as the silence continued. "It's a wintry day when I get left by ghosts!"

"I should say!"

Clearly and distinctly the words came, from across the room, in a voice that was feminine,

and musically pleasant. The sound came from directly opposite the sport, across the room.

For a moment, he did not speak or move. That there was another person in the cabin, besides himself was certain.

"Hello there!" he finally cried. "Who are you?"

"Polly wants a cracker," came in the unmistakable tones of a poll-parrot.

"You'll get one, if I don't get an answer from your owner, pretty soon!" Ed declared. "If there's any one in this cabin besides myself, I want to see that person. I'm Eagle City Ed, and I'm here on business—you bet!"

"Don't shoot, please!" the musical voice cried, anxiously. "If you will take the trouble to strike a light you will see that I am not a ghost!"

"I have no matches, or I would have had a light, long ago," Ed responded.

"Wait. I have some matches, sir."

There was a brief silence; then the crack of a parlor-match, and a little gleam of light followed.

"Wait, now I have some papers, which will burn, until we can find something better," Eagle City Ed said, dropping his illiterate style of speech, and using the language of a person of good education.

He crossed over to where a girlish figure was crouching, her white right hand holding the burning match.

In a moment he had ignited a newspaper which he happened to possess, and began a hurried search for something with which to produce a more permanent light.

Upon the hearth were two pine-knots, which he fired; a lantern was also found, containing a good-sized piece of candle, so that he soon had the apartment lit in every part.

He then turned his attention to her who had furnished the welcomed light.

He beheld, now standing erect, a girl, probably eighteen years of age, of a lithe, prettily-molded figure, and a fair, round, most winning face, partly set in a wreath of golden hair, and eyes of magnetic brilliancy—a "perfect little beauty," as Eagle City Ed had to admit and so agreeably surprised was he that he stood staring at her in undisguised amazement.

Her attire was plain, coarse and serviceable, but neat fitting. A belt about her waist contained a single pistol, and her hat, which lay upon the floor, was a jaunty sombrero.

The only furniture the cabin now boasted, was an old three-legged stool, and, leaning against this was a guitar, while perched upon the stool, was a huge red and green parrot, who was taking a "size-up" squint at the sport.

As he gazed upon the girl she laughed, musically.

"There, now, am I a ghost?" she exclaimed; "am I a phantom?"

"Hardly, I fancy," the sport replied. "But, how in the world did you come here?"

"On foot, of course—all the way from Spokane Falls, Idaho. My name is Polly Smith."

"Smith, eh?"

"Yes, sir. What is your name?"

"Well, latterly, when I am called anything, it is Eagle City Ed. I may once have possessed another name, but, if so, it was so long ago that I might be excused if it had passed entirely out of memory. I suppose the rain drove you in here?"

"Yes, sir. It rained so fiercely that I was glad to take refuge under almost any shelter."

"It was you, then, who threw the brickbat at me, a few minutes ago?"

"No, sir. I threw nothing whatever at you, and you nearly frightened my wits out of me when you fired the shots."

"You are sure—positive—that you threw nothing at me?"

"Oh! yes, sir. I heard some missile strike the door, but indeed I did not throw it, nor do I know who did."

"Then there may be something in the report about the cabin being haunted after all," Ed commented.

"If you were in here, prior to my arrival, you ought to be able to throw some light on the matter. This cabin is said to be haunted. While approaching the place, a short time ago, a flash of lightning revealed the door to be wide open, and the corpse of the former proprietor was standing in the doorway. A second flash revealed the door as being closed and the corpse gone. A third flash, when I was within three yards of the door, showed me the same apparition as the first had done. I sprung forward, and in an instant found myself in the open doorway, but not a vestige of a corpse did I encounter. Did you see anything of all of this?"

"I saw the door open and shut, but saw no apparition, such as you describe," Polly declared, looking both puzzled and frightened.

"I laid the opening and shutting of the door to the wind. Dear me! If I had had any idea that this place was haunted I'd never have entered it."

Eagle City Ed laughed.

"It was because the place had the reputation of being haunted that I came here," he said, "but I assure you that you are a different style of ghost from what I expected to encounter. I rather expected to feel cold clammy hands lay hold of me, and so be forced to dance a quadrille with a bona fide ghost."

"I must acknowledge that I am awful glad you came," Polly was forced to admit, "for I was getting nervous, it thundered and lightened so hard. So you really believe there is such a thing as ghosts, eh?"

"I am rather inclined to believe I do," Ed assented, picking up the stone which the invisible hand had hurled through the darkness, against the door. "If you didn't sling this stone at me, some one did, whether animate or inanimate."

"Well, then, there must be ghosts in this place," Polly agreed, "for I do not believe that Polly Number 2 had a hand in it."

"You bet!" articulated the parrot, making a vicious pick at the strings of the guitar.

Eagle City Ed gazed inquiringly about the room, but failed to find any indications that the place was tenanted by any one else than himself and Miss Polly Smith.

"Well, for the present we shall have to give it up as a mystery," he said. "And, failing to solve it you might relieve my mind of a great deal of curiosity if you were to explain your mission, up in this wild region."

"Indeed. I suppose it is a matter of surprise to you that I should be a wanderer in this wilderness. I am sometimes surprised myself, to tell the truth, and yet, so far in my travels, I have encountered no trouble; on the contrary I have been treated nicely and respectfully.

"I left my home, in Spokane Falls, nearly a year ago, fetching with me my only possessions, the guitar and my namesake, yonder—all that was left me out of the wreck of a once happy home."

"I infer then that your home was sold out."

"It was. My father left the Falls, to go prospecting, in hopes of being able to better his fortune. When he left home there were some debts standing against him, and as he did not return, our things were levied upon, and sold, and I was turned out of doors. I then set out on what has been, so far, a fruitless search for my father."

"His name—"

"Was John Smith?"

CHAPTER VI.

POLLY.

EAGLE CITY ED was not surprised at the answer, for from the moment of learning her own name, it had struck him that, possibly, she might be in some way related to the unfortunate Smith who had given Slab City its start.

Should he make known to her the fact that she was at the very moment in dead John Smith's cabin?

"Did you ever know or hear of a man by that name?" she asked, looking him searchingly in the face.

"Plenty of them," he replied, with a smile—"all the way from the time of the original Pocahontas John down to the present day. In fact, the former owner of this cabin was named John Smith, so I am told."

"The former owner you say? Where is he, now, and who is the present owner?" Polly demanded.

"Well, if one is supposed to believe all he hears, the John Smith I made reference to was lynched by a mob of indignant miners for salt-ing the territory around here, to attract the crowd. His little game was found out, and he formed one of the principals of a little neck-tie party. His affairs were taken in charge by an individual known as Nabob Ned, who, owing to a rum'r that the cabin is haunted by John Smith's restless spirit, offered to give me the shebang if I would remain in it, all of to-night. So I came, and here I am."

"Can it be possible that this person, who was lynched, was my father? Oh! sir, I cannot believe it. Papa was a good man, and no one but a wretched, would think of harming him."

"Well, I don't know about that, I am sure. This man Smith was accused of having planted gold hereabouts, for the sake of getting up a

boom, and when he was found out, he was treated according to the code of border justice. Whether it was your father or not I do not know. For your sake I hope not!"

"Oh! if it should turn out that it was my papa, I don't know what I should do. He is all the relative I have in the wide world, and to lose him would be sad indeed."

"Very true. Perhaps, after all, it was not your father, but some one of a like name."

"I am very much afraid it is my poor papa. It is over a year and a half since he left home, and in all that time I have never heard from him. This is what causes me to fear that he and the man who was lynched are one and the same person. You say you saw an apparition when approaching this cabin. Will you please describe it to me?"

"Certainly. It was like a man standing in the doorway. The miners who saw it declared it to be the corpse of John Smith, or else his phantom. It couldn't have been his corpse, for when I sprung into the doorway where but an instant before I had seen the apparition, nobody was there but myself. There is, of course, some infernal mystery about the matter and I mean to find out what it is if possible."

"Was the apparition that of a large man?"

"Well, no—not exactly, but of a person about five feet six, I should say, and not very heavily built. As near as I could judge, aided by the flashes of lightning, his beard, which was worn full, was of a rather sandy hue, and I should have placed him as being about forty-five years of age."

Tears sprung into Miss Polly Smith's eyes, and she hid her face in her hands and wept: the description evidently was that of her missing parent.

"It is my father they have killed—oh! sir, it is my poor father, and I am left all alone in the world," she sobbed.

"Don't cry, Polly, don't cry!" cried the parrot. "Poor Polly—pretty Polly. Polly wants a cracker!" but seeing that its appeal was likely to pass unheeded, the bird began to cry and snivel as if its heart was broken.

"Do not take it so hard, Miss Smith, I beg of you," Eagle City Ed said, laying his hand upon her head. "Even though it proves true that your father is dead, it is not true that you are alone and friendless. There are many hearts that go out in sympathy for an orphan, and Eagle City Ed is not one of the least of these sympathizers. Our chance meeting has caused me to take an interest in you and your case, and inasmuch as you are alone, like myself, in strange surroundings, I should consider it an honor to be permitted to extend you any protection or assistance that lies within my power. There seems to exist a mystery concerning the cabin and your father's case, and I propose to ferret it out, let the cost be whatever it may. You may be of a great deal of assistance to me, and if you will accept my friendship, I will do all in my power to make it worth your while to do so."

He gazed at Miss Polly so earnestly as to cause her to give him a quick, earnest glance from her tearful eyes; then she dropped her gaze, and a vivid blush suffused her cheek.

"I should be very glad to possess your friendship, sir—very glad. I have no acquaintances here—no one in the world except my parrot. I propose to sing here in Slab City, so that I shall probably not need any pecuniary assistance. How I will be received and treated by the miners I of course do not know."

"I fear none too kindly, and should, as a friend, advise you not to sing. The men of Slab City, as a rule, are a bad set, and none too likely to treat a young woman like you with civility. You had better give up your intention of appearing, for, although I should make it my point to protect you, it might involve us both in a serious unpleasantness. If you are in need of pecuniary assistance, I shall be only too glad to assist you."

"I could not for a moment think of accepting your proffered assistance, sir, while I have it in my power to earn the money. I hope this will not give you offense, but that, on the contrary, you will think the better of me because of my independence. I have sung in various mining-towns quite successfully, and prefer to adopt that as my profession, until it is proven to me beyond the shadow of a doubt that my poor father is really dead. Then, I shall plan for the future as best I can."

"But, Miss Smith, where will you sing, here, in Slab City? There is no fit place for you to appear in!"

"There are saloons, are there not? Although distasteful to me, I am not afraid to appear in

them, as I have done so before. I came to this town to sing, and shall do so."

Bright, clever, and possessed of a will of her own was Miss Polly Smith—a fact which did not fail to impress Eagle City Ed.

"Very well. Seeing that your resolution is so formed, Miss Smith, I will not seek to change it, but rather, with your permission, will try to assist you. If you appear, it must be for a pecuniary object, and the matter so arranged that your success from the start shall be substantial. I will contrive to bill the town for you, and transact any little important items of business for you; and thus I, acting as your agent, you will be less likely to be exposed to insult, as the people of Slab City will begin to realize by morning that Eagle City Ed is not particularly on the 'skeer.'"

"Oh! sir, that will be just capital, and I have so much to thank you for, in the way of kindness! I have been wondering whom I would get to put up some notices for me. And now, if you can but aid me in this way, I shall be nicely fixed for my stay in Slab City, after securing hotel accommodations. Or, do you think I had better put up here?"

"I am not determined about that matter yet, but will hold it subject to further deliberation. One thing is sure: if John Smith proves to have been your father, and we can successfully establish the fact, you will have no need to sing for a livelihood, as the better share of Slab City will rightfully belong to you, and that will comprise a fortune of no mean extent."

CHAPTER VII.

MANUFACTURING GHOSTS.

THUS Miss Smith and her new-found advocate chattered, and the hours passed more quickly than either surmised.

After about an hour's time the rain somewhat abated.

Curious to know if the watchers were still keeping their vigil, Eagle City Ed concluded to make observations.

Above the strong door was an opening, guarded by an iron grating, which ventilated the cabin when the door was closed.

Mounting the stool, the only piece of furniture in the place, Ed was barely able to look through the hole by standing on tiptoes.

As he did so, a flash of lightning revealed to him some half a dozen men standing where he had left them.

Like heroes they had stood the pelting rain, partly out of curiosity, but mostly through a desire to earn the reward Nabob Ned had offered.

"Are they still watching?" Polly asked, having informed her of the circumstances before.

"You bet!" Ed laughed, good-naturedly. "They don't intend to let me out of here before morning; and, more than that, I am not in the least inclined to vamose while I have such unghostly society as your lovely self. I mean, however, to have some fun on my own hook."

"What are you going to do?"

"This. The ghostly manifestations around this shebang having suddenly ceased, since we got light on the subject, I propose to reorganize something ghostly on my own hook, if possible."

"We may get some bona-fide ones ere long, as I see that the torches are burning low."

"The light will last till nearly morning, I guess. We have been here quite a number of hours already. Now, then, let's see what I can do to create a circus."

Although the cabin lacked for furniture, various other articles were there, among which he found a keg half-filled with gunpowder.

He also made examinations of the floor and walls of the cabin, but could find no part or portion wherein ghosts or bodies could possibly be secreted.

Years before, ere circumstances caused him to become a rover throughout the wild West, he had learned his trade in the employ of a prominent Metropolitan manufacturer of pyrotechnics, and had not yet forgotten it by any means.

Fireworks of ingenious shapes and action he could manufacture out of a little paper and powder, and some of these he now set to work to put into shape.

An ample supply of waste paper was found in the cabin, and as the roof leaked in a number of places, he had no difficulty in dampening his powder when occasion required.

Polly watched him curiously, both puzzled and interested.

In half an hour's time, Eagle City Ed had fully a dozen varieties of fireworks manufactured.

He then cast about him as to the best method of giving his exhibition.

The chimney was a huge affair, built of mortar and stone, and so constructed, probably with a view to the defensive in case of an attack as to allow a person to climb up within the chimney to its top.

On making this discovery Ed felt jubilant, for it gave him the means of working without leaving the cabin.

Securing several of the articles he had manufactured, he ascended the chimney, and set off the pieces in rapid succession, with a result somewhat startling.

The pieces had been manufactured to display as snakes, and the way they went squirming down the roof and side of the cabin from that chimney was a sight which must have caused the miners and roughs a shock of surprise.

At any rate they gave yells of astonishment, and several shots were fired.

The effect was so near what he had expected that Eagle City Ed concluded to forego the setting off of the other pieces and to reconvert them into more powerful snakes.

This he lost no time in doing, and out of the powder left succeeded in forming six extra strong serpents.

Then placing the empty keg on the stool, he fixed it so that Polly could look out of the ventilating window.

Ascending the chimney, a flash of lightning gave him the location of the watchers.

They had approached several yards closer to the cabin, as if impelled by curiosity and doubt in regard to the fiery serpents.

At which Eagle City Ed laughed.

"Oh! I'll make you scot!" he muttered. "I'll make you mosey in short meter or my name is not Eagle City Ed."

Poising one of the snakes, he first emptied six chambers of one of his revolvers into the air above him; then, igniting the fuse to the snake he hurled it out upon the roof of the cabin—then a second, a third, and so on in rapid succession, until the whole six snakes were writhing down the walls and shooting away toward the watching miners, whom Polly, on Ed's descending into the cabin, reported to be skurrying away, at the best of their speed, with frantic yells of terror.

"Oh! how they did run!" Polly cried, gleefully, as she sprung lightly down from the perch. "They were frightened out of their wits, and I guess they won't get so near to the cabin, again."

"I am not so sure of that," Ed replied, taking advantage of the perch she had vacated.

Reconnoissance through the grated window resulted in no new discovery. The lightning had abated, and all now was gloom. The watchers might either be speeding away toward the town, or creeping back toward the cabin.

Ed replenished the fire with what little fuel remained, and throwing his coat upon the floor, bade Polly obtain what rest she could, until morning.

Which she declined to do, but insisted upon remaining up and keeping him company, until they could seek better quarters.

Accordingly she tuned up the guitar, and ran her fingers over the strings in a manner that proved her to be no mere novice.

Then, in a clear rich voice, she sang several popular ballads.

Ed had a keen appreciation of music, and now listened to Polly's really artistic execution in delighted surprise, and when Polly at length laid aside the instrument, he complimented her highly and earnestly.

Again reconnoitering, Ed discovered the gray streaks of dawn in the East. It was, however, still densely dark, in the gulch.

"I've been thinking," Ed said, addressing his pretty protegee, "that it will be better for you to leave the cabin before daylight, as some of the townspeople may come to see if I am alive, and finding you here, in my company, might give rise to remarks, distasteful to you."

"I have also been thinking of the matter myself," Polly assented, "and if there is a chance of my leaving, without being seen, I presume it would be better to do so, and for me to approach the town during the forenoon."

"Exactly. I will reconnoiter, leaving the cabin by the chimney. If you soon hear six quick knocks on the door, unbar it and let me in. That will be a signal that all is safe for your leaving the cabin."

"Very well. I hope that you will run into

no danger, sir, on my account. I am not worth it."

"Indeed!" Ed laughed as he reloaded his revolvers. Then he disappeared up the chimney.

It was an easy matter to get out upon the roof, and thence to the ground, at the side of the cabin, which was still enveloped in the deepest shadow.

It would not be so easy a matter to get back to the roof, however, in case he could not gain access to the cabin by the front door, without exposing himself as a target.

Leaping to the ground, he made a *detour*, and soon arrived at a point where the watchers should be if still keeping their vigil.

The light had now materially increased—enough so, that he was able in a short time, to satisfy himself that the miners and roughs had all sought the main part of the mining-camp, either for rest or for drink.

The sport therefore hastened to the cabin, and was at once admitted.

Polly had her few effects in readiness, and leaving the place, was a goodly distance away, and out of sight, ere the full light of day broke over the City of Slabs.

CHAPTER VIII.

MADE TO "PONY UP."

NABOB NED's night had been rather ill-spent, at the Bung-Eye saloon.

After failing to score his scheme, so that it should implicate Pedro Sperra, the apparently treacherous Mexican, he was left in a moody and sullen state, and, something new for him to do, drank deeply.

He had considerable money—somewhere in the neighborhood of five thousand dollars, and before two o'clock in the morning, what he had not spent at the bar, he had "blown in," at the faro table, without making a win.

This served to further sour his humor and he paced to and fro across the gaming room, in tip-top order, as one miner suggested, to "spit up blood and swaller it."

A short time before daybreak, the watchers reappeared at the Bung-Eye, rain-soaked, and as disconsolate a looking set of humans as ever put their red flannel shirt-fronts to a Western bar.

"We takes bug juice, we do!" Big Boots bellowed, in a tone that was none the mildest. "We drink's tarantler, wi' a rattlesnake or two throwed inter it, ter warm up on, an' Nabob Ned he pays for it."

The Slab City conveyancer heard the declaration, and strode forward, with a fierce oath, and a savage scowl.

He evidently didn't "tumble."

"Who said I was going to pay for the drinks here?" he cried, savagely. "I reckon the party that said so made a slight mistake."

"Waal, I should blush!" Big Boots roared, putting his arms akimbo, and glaring at Nabob as if it would be a pleasure to him to make a meal off of him. "My cognomen air Big Boots, and I'm a hustler from Hell Hollow, you bet! I did asseverate that yeow war goin' to pay fer ther drinks, an' I'm here to back up what I said, or masticate something."

"You'll have to go to masticating at once, then!" Nabob retorted, "for I'll swear I don't pay for any drinks that go over that bar, without I order 'em personally. I'm in no wise indebted to any of you. Had you remained on duty till morning, you would each have been entitled to five dollars. As it is not morning yet, you have forfeited all claim on me."

"Et aire mornin'!" Big Boots declared, "an' we watched that Eagle City Ed didn't leave the cabin. We 'arnt our money, an' yer kin bet yer duckets that we gits it. Eh! boyees?"

"On course we do!"

"Hooray fer Big Boots!"

"We gits the cash or we spills a bar'l o' bleed!"

Such and kindred shouts filled the air, in response to Big Boots.

Revolvers were drawn, and Nabob Ned found himself covered.

"Oh! you've got ter come ter time!" Big Boots howled. "Ye war licked by one leetle snake-eyed Mexican. 'Cept that ye war picked out by Eagle City Ed, an' then ye got onto yer ear an' went ter pickin' onto him. Now, I'll disreck my ole boots, and chaw ther pegs fer dinner, ef ye kin play any o' yer slim games on yer uncle—oh! no, not a durned smidger of it! I've eat up grizzly b'ars alive on toast, I hev, an' swallered molten lead, an' when ye git my mad up, I'm wuss'n a elerphant w'ot's bin fed on terbac. So yerst you flicker out our fives, an' tell ther juice-wrassler ter treat us

white, or yer funeral percession will form in line at tew P. M.!"

Back to full cock did Big Boots draw the hammer of his revolver, and Nabob Ned clearly saw that the men meant business, and he turned a shade paler, for he now had not a cent at his immediate command.

"Come! d'ye hear my zephyr voice?" Big Boots roared, flourisbing his persuader. "Aire ye goin' ter come down, or aire you not?"

"This is unfair!" Nabob declared, his eyes glittering angrily.

"Ye'r' a liar!" Boots bawled, fiercely. "We stayed out thar in ther dew, like leetle ducks, an' never whimpered, till ther stripes o' Aurory beginned tew show in ther east—then, we calkylated that Eagle City Ed hed bin game enough, an' we levanted. We see'd ther devil's own fiery serpents a come pourin' out o' ther chimney, an' the cussed things chased us half-way ter camp. Now, ef we 'arnt ther cash, we gits it—that's all. Ef we didn't, you git it—cold lead, right from ther muzzle!"

Nabob Ned was silent a moment, before he made any response.

"I am sorry, gents," he finally said, "that I haven't a cent of money about my person, at the present moment, having just b'owed it all in at the bank, yonder, as the dealer can tell you. What I propose is this: You all go down to the cabin, and order Eagle City Ed to open up, or burst in the door if you get no answer. If you find him there, dead or alive, come back to me, and you shall have your money. If he is gone, you get none."

Some of the men gave a grunt of assent.

Big Boots, however, and one or two others, immediately objected.

"Thet won't work!" the giant declared. "Ye want a chance ter play ther skin game on us, yeo do. Et won't work fer a cent. Well go down ter ther cabin all right, an' find Eagle City Ed thar all right, you bet. But afore we go, we'll jest sit a leetle watch onto Mr. Nabob Neddy, so he can't slide off out o' our vision like duck down on top of a Montana zephyr."

"I refuse to be dictated to in this manner, sir! I am no' a suspicious character, to be dogged by spies, and shall do as I please. If you don't choose to do as I proposed, why I have nothing more to say."

"What are ye afraid ter let one o' us watch ye fer?" Big Boots demanded. "Ye must hev some cat ye'r' afraid o' lettin' out o' the bag, or else a treasure cache, or suthin' o' the kind!"

"I will not argue with you. I have said my say."

"Then, durn yer pictur', we'll hev *our* say, you bet! We'll give yer jest five minnits ter fork over the cash, or do as we tell ye!"

The bar room of the Bung-Eye afforded a clock, and the hands pointed to within five minutes of the hour.

Big Boots fixed one eye on the dial and the other upon Nabob Ned, while his fingers worked around the trigger in a restless manner, that was dangerously suggestive to the man at whom the weapon was leveled.

What Nabob would have said or done, under the circumstances, can only be surmised, for, at this juncture, a man stepped forward, saying:

"There is no use of having any disturbance about this matter, gentlemen, I assure you. Nabob Ned, as you call him, is undoubtedly responsible for all he says he will do; but, if his word won't answer, I will loan him what money he needs. How much will it be, sir?"

Nabob Ned's face betrayed great surprise, but he made no hesitation in accepting this way out of a dilemma.

"There were twelve men; accordingly, it will require sixty dollars," he said.

"An' ther cost o' the whisky fer ther house!" Big Boots added, with an ugly grin.

Without a word the man, who was a stranger in the town, counted out sixty dollars, which he placed in Nabob's hands, and also threw a twenty-dollar note upon the bar, with the brief remark:

"There, gents—drink that out!"

This stranger then retired to a seat at a card-table.

Nabob Ned paid off the men, who really seemed loth to take the money, as they had got their ire up for a rumpus; then he quietly approached the stranger who had so voluntarily come to his aid, and put out his white hand.

"Sir, although you are a stranger to me, accept my sincere thanks for your opportune act," he said; "and rest assured, if it ever comes within my power to be of any service to you, you can command me."

"I may take advantage of your offer, sir,

sooner than you think," the stranger replied, puffing away leisurely at a cigar.

He was a man about whose appearance there was nothing extraordinary—a thing quite singular, too, for a town like Slab City; for the gold and silver region population is so largely made up of singular persons.

This person in question was of some five-or-six-and-forty years of age, well built, and just an ordinary-looking man, with brown eyes and beard. He evidently had spent some years in the West, but as evidently was not Western born.

His attire was a serviceable blue suit, and heavy walking-shoes, and a straw hat, a rather odd-looking head-gear it was, too, for a country where snow-capped peaks hovered above the town the year round.

He wore no weapons exposed to view, if indeed he carried any at all about his person.

Nabob Ned drew a chair to the table and sat down. The reply of the stranger had given him the impression that a further acquaintance was wanted.

"Might I make so bold as to inquire your name?" he asked.

"Oh! certainly," was the reply, in a calm yet magnetic tone—for, dear reader, you must admit that there is magnetism in voices. "My name is Harold Henshaw; I presume you have heard of the name before."

Nabob shook his head in the negative. Only a slight twitch about his mouth betrayed that he *had* heard the name before.

"I do not think I have met or heard of you before this meeting," Nabob answered. "Henshaw—Henshaw! Let me see. No, I am sure I have never known a person of that name."

Mr. Henshaw laughed again—a peculiar laugh it was, expressing to some extent a feeling of sarcasm.

"Edward Landis, you do know the name even as well as you know your own, and it is quite useless now to deny that you know me. Did you ever hear of a little town in Colorado, called Silver Cliff?"

Nabob Ned's face flushed, the gleam that nestled in his eyes grew stronger in its intensity.

"Well! what of Silver Cliff?" he demanded. "What of Silver Cliff?"

The words of Harold Henshaw evidently had aroused the sleeping tiger of the little sport's nature.

Henshaw eyed him a moment, curiously.

"Do you want me to repeat all I know about you and Silver Cliff?" he demanded.

The sport did not answer at once, but regarded Henshaw much after the manner a caged tiger regards the people who are peering in at him from without the grates.

"I do not think it necessary," he replied, at length. "You are surely mistaken in your man for once. I think you made the drive at me for the purpose of finding out if there was not a possibility that I might be your man. What is your business? Are you a detective?"

"I am not, although I have a mission something of the nature of detective work."

"I surmised so. Chance has made it within my power, perhaps, to aid you, in return for the favor you have done me to-night. My name is not Edward Landis, by any means, but Edwin Hurst. I, however, have met this Edward Landis."

"You have?"

"I have. Tell me your errand after Edward Landis, and I may be able to put you on his track."

Henshaw looked thoughtful a moment.

"I don't know that I ought to make confidants of strangers," he said, deliberately. "In this case, however, I don't know that it can make any particular difference. If not Edward Landis, you are, I presume, a person of good character, and one who can be trusted."

"Without a doubt!"

"Well, then, I will confide in you. You say you know this Edward Landis?"

"I have seen him."

"Ah! Where?"

"Go on with your confidence. I can answer after you are through."

Henshaw frowned at this. He had no boy to deal with.

"Well, I will go on!" he said, watching Nabob as if he was suspicious of him. "I am a gentleman worth considerable money, and until recently a resident of Silver Cliff, where my family reside. My extensive mining-interests have kept me away from my home more than I could desire. This fact has brought me dire trouble. During one of my absences, my eighteen-year old daughter Helen met and be-

came intimately acquainted with a person of fascinating presence, whose name, it appears, was Edward Landis. From her description of him I picked you out as the man."

"Unfortunately for you, you made a wrong selection, sir."

"Possibly."

"Positively instead of possibly. Edward Landis and myself do not resemble each other in the least. But, go on."

"Well, this acquaintance between Landis and my daughter ripened into admiration such as affect young people—for one can scarcely call it love—and they were engaged. My daughter informed me of this by mail, and I hastened home, if possible to prevent more serious consequences. On arrival I found that there had been a private ceremony, and then, a few days later, Landis had started forth to make his fortune, ostensibly by gold-mining. Investigation, however, proved to my satisfaction that the marriage was a sham, of which Helen had become an unsuspecting victim. So I registered a vow to hunt him down, and force him to re-marry my daughter or give his life as the forfeit."

"Your feeling in the matter is certainly commendable," Nabob Ned declared, quietly. "I would do the same, were I in your tracks. And, as Edward Landis is in this very camp, it will not trouble you to perfect your arrangements."

"Ha! he is here, then?"

"Yes. Come to me, during to-day, and I will point him out to you."

"Thanks; I will do so. As my daughter has accompanied me here, it will be no trouble to bring our man to time. I will present you to Helen, during the day."

Nabob Ned shook his head, negatively at that suggestion.

"Spare me!" he said, putting up his hands.

"I am a natural woman-hater and always make it a point to avoid their society, as much as possible. To-morrow, I will show you Edward Landis, but do not care, any further to enter into your case."

"Very well, sir. I am much obliged to you, I am sure. If we succeed in finding this Landis, you shall not go unrewarded."

"Thank you. I shall ask no compensation for doing you so slight a favor."

The conveyancer of Slab City then took leave of the husband-hunter, musing as he did so:

"No! I don't want any pay, Mr. Henshaw. I wouldn't take it for the world."

CHAPTER IX.

IN DEFENSE OF POLLY.

WHEN daylight had fully flooded Slab City a party, made up of Big Boots, Pedro Sperra and a dozen miners, made their way to the haunted cabin, where, to their surprise, they found the door open and Eagle City Ed sitting on the threshold, enjoying a morning cigar.

"Good-morning, gents!" he saluted, as they came up regarding him with curious glances. "Had a pretty tough time of it outside, didn't ye? Why in blazes didn't ye come and join me? I was as dry and snug as a bug in a rug in here."

"Durn me ef you luk like you'd bin knocked out wi' ghosts, 'cept yer all covered wi' black!" Big Boots grunted.

"Trouble? Knocked out by ghosts?" and Edward laughed boisterously. "Why, I had the he-hosiest pick-nick of my life. Furst along the durned spirits did not take kindly ter me, but went ter slippin' me with pavin' stones. After I kindled a fire, tho', things went diff'rent. Old Smithy riz up thro' the floor an' welcomed me, an' fetched along a passel of other friends of his, an' sech a racket we did hev! Smithy sed I war jest ther man to take his cabin, fer he's in other biz now!"

The miners looked incredulous, while a few of them laughed.

"Come, neow, git out! Ye can't seal us wi' sech sort o' stickin'-wax as that!" Big Boots asseverated. "We ain't so orful flip, but the ghost-racket won't work."

"Won't it? Bet ye a hundred there is not a man of ye dare stay in the ranch to-night an' see the fun!"

Eagle City Ed seemed so dead in earnest that the gang exchanged glances.

"Oh! Smithy hes got it in fer you fellers, all 'cause ye choked off his wind. He hes got ye down fine, an' soon's he gits thro' with his present job, he's goin' to make it sulph'rous for ye," the sport informed the astonished crowd.

"What job?" sneered Sperra.

"Oh! he's trainin' a den of snakes fer the Fish Government. St. Pat aire goin' ter use

'em ag'in' the English. Several of 'em got away an' run up the chimney, an' I chased 'em, but couldn't ketch 'em. But the best snap was ther dancin'. We did jest hoe it down great. Hed a gal w'ot played the guitar an' sung opery. Phew, but she was a daisy!"

The crowd looked even more mystified than before, and, while some ventured forward to peer into the cabin, others held aloof, apparently not anxious to get any closer to the house than they already were.

"Waal, durn my boots ef ye can't live in the den fer all o' my interferin'," Big Boots answered with a shrug of his shoulders. "Ef the place is ha'nted, I've got no time around it," a decision that was received with approval by his companions.

Even Sperra did not appear to be particularly assured.

After a little further conversation, Eagle City Ed locked the cabin door, and returned with the crowd, to the camp.

As Nabob Ned could not be found about the Bung-Eye, the Eagle City man engaged a room and retired to it.

The rooms of the Bung-Eye were all on the second floor, and partitioned off with heavy muslin, the furniture consisting of a "slammed-up" bed, a stool, tin wash-basin, and bucket of water.

Taking a wash, Eagle City Ed descended to the street, and hunting up a Jew clothing shop—one of the first business features of the shanty town—soon had himself "togg'd" out in a way that altered his appearance greatly.

He then went back to the hotel, just in time to witness a scene that caused his temper to arise like the mercury in a thermometer, on a red-hot August day.

In the office of the Bung Eye establishment, surrounded and hemmed in by a curious mob, comprising principally the roughest element of the camp, stood Miss Polly Smith, guitar in hand, and with the parrot perched upon her shoulder.

Her face was flushed, and tears were on the point of springing into her eyes.

Without waiting Eagle City Ed bounded forward, and by main force, hurled several of the crowd aside.

"Stand away here, you boors!" he cried, sharply. "Is this all the manners you have? Out of the way!" at the same time exhibiting a pair of cocked revolvers. "I'll learn you to insult a lady while I'm around this camp."

"We warn't insultin' her, Mule-Ears," a ruffian cried. "We wanted her ter play, an' she's got ter play—that's all."

"No, that's not all!" Ed cried. "Git up and git out o' here, you hounds, or I'll salivate you! This young lady is under my protection, I'll have you know, and the man who raises a finger to harm her, or a voice to insult her, dies with his boots on. What were they saying or doing, Miss Polly?"

"Oh! nothing, sir, only they stopped me here and insisted on my playing."

"The impudent brutes! I've a mind to kill half a dozen on the half-shell, just for the experiment. Here, sir,"—to the proprietor, who had just come up—"show this young lady, Ma'm'selle Pauline Smith, to the best apartment your house affords, and if a repetition of this act ever occurs you'll need to organize a bucket brigade to dip up the gore I'll spill for you."

"The lady shall have the best attention!" the proprietor declared; for, although Bung-Eye Jake was a tough customer, a woman stood higher in his regard than twenty pounds of gold.

Accordingly, at Ed's nod, Polly Smith accompanied the Chinese waiter of the establishment to the room assigned her, while Ed turned his attention to those he had lately repulsed, among them being Big Boots and Sperra.

The general expression of the different faces was that of anger and resentment.

"Now, then, my posies," the sport said, coolly, "as you seem a bit on the edge of your ear over my taking that young lady's part, I want you to allow me the privilege of informing you that your little thunder-clap looks don't scare me worth a pint of hard cider. That young lady is traveling under my management, and I am amply able to take care of her and her interests, so far as protection and managing her business are concerned. I am aware that many of you imagine yourselves to be walking terrors, from whom even an African lion would run in alarm. To me you are nothing of the kind. I'm neither afraid of one nor a dozen of you, and if you're ripe for having a funeral, the cutest caper will be to let the funeral commence at once, in

order that the preacher kin git his fee quick'er!"

Standing there, handsome, resolute and defiant, the man from Eagle City uttered the challenge, his eyes looking over every face in the crowd with a deadly glitter.

Not a murmur escaped the crowd, but their faces grew harder in expression.

A moment Eagle City Ed glared at them; then, seeing no defense, he went on:

"That young lady is Pauline Smith, a fatherless girl, who depends upon her musical abilities to gain support—or rather, has done so, until now, when it will soon be unnecessary for her to do so, for, in her own natural right, she will be well enough off not to be forced to appear before you as a vocalist. To-night, however, she will appear in her professional capacity, and I believe there are enough men in Slab City, counting myself out, to hang the man who dares to insult or offend her in the slightest!"

For an instant another dead silence reigned—then, simultaneously, the major portion of the crowd broke into a yell of applause!

"Rah! hip! yoop'rah fer Party Poll!" howled Big Boots, executing a caper. "Ther ger-loot w'ot durst luk cross-eyed at her wull hev ther top o' his pericranium cut open, an doused up wi' p'izen'd salt an' bug-juice. 'Rah fer Party Poll an' Eagle City Ed!"

The cheers were given with boisterous enthusiasm by all except a few.

Eagle City Ed next ordered the gang up to take something, after which he prepared a huge poster, announcing the following for the benefit of all who could read:

"GRAND VOCAL AND INSTRUMENTAL ENTERTAINMENT!

THE CHARMING CANTATRICE AND GUITARIST,

M L L E. PAULINE,

WILL SING AT BUNG-EYE, TO NIGHT.

HEAR HER! PAN OUT FOR HER!

Eagle City Ed, Manager."

In the mean time, following the disturbance, Pedro Sperra had hunted up Nabob Ned, and found him in the gulch, pacing to and fro, not far from the haunted cabin.

A scowl came over his face as the Mexican approached.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded, crustily.

"To see you, of course," was the answer, in the Greaser's most amiable tone. "Here is a bowlder. Let's sit down, and have a chat on business."

"Well, be brief. I've some business to attend to myself, pretty soon."

"Yes, and if I don't lose my guess, you will have more than you can attend to ere long!"

Nabob eyed the other with a keen glance.

"Why do you think so?" he demanded.

"For a very simple reason. The town is beginning to refill with people again, and it is but natural your business should increase."

"True!"

"Certainly. This Smith estate, not to mention what has been disposed of, will yet be a bonanza to its owner."

The conveyancer's face brightened perceptibly.

"You are right," he assented; "and I'll be closer with the money hereafter than I have hitherto been."

"Of course you ought to; it will be but a short time before you will have to vacate."

"What?"

"Exactly. You'll soon have to give up to the next of kin to John Smith, who already has arrived in town."

The conveyancer uttered a fierce oath.

"You lie!" he growled. "The old cuss had no known relatives living, and it was voted that what was his belonged to me."

"That don't make a particle of difference, sir," Sperra replied, with composure. "Listen."

He then went on to relate the circumstances of Miss Smith's arrival at the Bung-Eye, not missing a point, even to the acclamation with which she and Eagle City Ed had been received, after his daring the crowd.

Nabob's face darkened, but he made an attempt to scoff at the idea of his prospects being in any danger.

"Pooh! nonsense. Because the girl's name is Smith, that signifies nothing, and even if it did, what of it? We are not supposed to take the word of every straggler or adventurer that comes along, that they are so-and-so. The girl

is a fraud, without a doubt, and if she goes to trying any funny business around here, she'll wake up some morning with her throat cut."

"Good! Don't you let 'em bamboozle you. If you want any help, I'm the man for scheming and working."

"How do you mean?"

"As I said. This Eagle City Ed is managing the girl's business, and if I do say it, there's but one man in Slab City able to cope with him, by power of possessing a knowledge of him that no one else possesses or even surmises."

"Do I understand that you would hire out to me, to serve my interests, for a stipulated sum of money?"

"No, I would not work for money, but for revenge!"

"Ah! how is that, when you told me that you would protect, rather than harm, this Eagle City Ed?"

"I was wild then, because I hated you. But time brought back my reason. I have a mission of vengeance to perform, and it must be performed soon."

"I don't know of any employment for you. You Mexicans are as treacherous as adders, anyhow."

"I am not treacherous, except to enemies. You have employment for me, and it will require but the telling of a single fact to convince you."

"Well, out with it!"

"It is this: The girl whom Eagle City Ed has in his charge is the true and genuine daughter of the John Smith, who was hung here, in Slab City!"

"Bah! Don't try to lie to me!"

"Nor do I, for I saw her in Spokane Falls before ever I came here, or her father either. She has come here, undoubtedly, to claim her own!"

For several minutes Nabob Ned gave ventilation to his rage, through the medium of curses and wishes for vengeance; then turning fiercely upon the Mexican he demanded:

"How much money do you want to become my spy, assistant schemer and aid in this matter?"

"No money. Counsel with me, before each and every act, and I will give you such advice as will be prudent, and will help you to win."

"Upon your honor, as a Mexican?"

"Upon the sacred honor of a Mexican."

"Then listen: As you say, there may be a fight, but the two of us united, and with such material as I can collect, we ought to win, without a doubt. If we do win, I'll make you my half-partner in all there is belonging to the John Smith estate. And, 'sh! mind you, not that alone: there are secrets lurking in Slab City. Serve me faithfully, and you shall not miss them."

"I assent. Here is my hand. Now we must lie in wait and watch the very first developments. They are liable to come, at any time."

Just then, Eagle City Ed was seen coming toward them.

"He's coming for the deed to the haunted cabin!" Sperra explained. "You'll have to give it to him. He's too much at the fighting business for us. We must at present do the best we can and not get hurt."

CHAPTER X. PLOTTING.

"GOOD-DAY, gentlemen!" Eagle City Ed saluted, inclining his head particularly to Nabob as he came up. "Have you been down to the cabin to see if I had slaughtered any ghosts, sir?"

"No," Nabob replied, coldly. "There are no such a thing as ghosts, else you would not have remained in that cabin all night."

"I would have remained in that place all night if there had been ten thousand full-fledged members of Satan's cabinet there!"

"Large words, but nothing more. This gentleman and I were having a little private conversation. If you will be brief in stating your business we will excuse you."

"That I can do without much trouble. I came for the transfer of the cabin property to my name and possession."

"You came to no purpose, then. No amount of money could buy that property!" Nabob sulily declared.

"Yet you bargained with me for it."

"Bah! I was only fooling."

"I was not. You made me a fair and square offer, which I accepted and carried out. I expect you to hold good to your promise."

"I won't do it! I shall hold the cabin by all means, for nothing goes in this camp except it is put down on paper in black and white."

"Then you positively refuse to give me the cabin?"

"You bet I do!"

"Then, not only will I take the place without your leave, but I'll teach you a lesson!"

He bounded forward and struck Ned a terrific blow in the face, which knocked the Nabob senseless; then turning, without deigning the Mexican a glance, he strode toward the camp.

Fifteen minutes later, Nabob Ned and Sperra could have been seen going in the same direction.

The conveyancer's face was swollen from the effects of the blow, one eye being nearly closed.

There was an expression on his face which boded no good to his assailant and enemy.

When the hotel was reached the twain separated, Nabob alone entering.

Eagle City Ed was nowhere to be seen, but it was not for him, in particular, that Ned was searching, but for Harold Henshaw, whom he soon found seated at a poker-table, with a pile of chips before him, having just made a haul.

He soon cleaned the board on a big sweep, and then arose.

"Did you wish to see me, sir?" he asked, addressing Nabob.

"Yes," the latter replied, leading the way to a quiet corner of the room. "I have something important to say to you."

They were soon seated at a table, with a bottle of wine and glasses between them.

Then, Henshaw said:

"Now, I am ready to hear what that matter of importance is."

The conveyancer forthwith narrated the history of John Smith, so far as Slab City was concerned in it.

"But, what interest is all this to me?" the Silver Cliff man demanded, finally, somewhat impatiently.

"A great deal, if you listen!"

He then proceeded to tell of the arrival of Miss Polly Smith, and the probability that she would lay claim to the estate.

Henshaw still looked blank.

"I am not particularly brilliant as to what you're driving at!" he declared.

"I will try to enlighten your comprehensions," Nabob went on, with blandness. "Now, you will see that I'd be a most consummate fool to allow myself to be ousted from an estate that will be—is now—worth a fine fortune. No! sir-ee, I won't have nothing like that, you can bet your prettiest. To begin with, I'll tell you something that will surprise you. My real name is De Wolf; nevertheless, I never use it, for reasons best known to myself. I am, however, the man you first took me for—Edward Landis, but I will remarry your daughter only under certain conditions. You need not get furious or hasty, as my hand here, in my left coat pocket, clutches a cocked revolver, which is aimed toward your heart. So, if you are sensible enough to believe that I have the bulge on you, we will begin to talk business!"

Henshaw glared at the good-looking knave, savagely, as if tempted to fly at him, and rend him limb from limb.

"So you are the villain who deserted my daughter, are you?" he cried, hoarsely. "Curses rest upon you! I've a mind to kill you where you sit!"

"You couldn't do it; besides, even if you did, you would gain nothing, as you would be strung up within an hour. So, the most sensible thing for both is to hold our tempers, and see if we cannot come to some satisfactory terms."

"Terms! Make terms with a man of your stamp?"

"Certainly. In order to retain my grip on this property, I have conceived a plan something like the following: This Eagle City Ed is trying to get ahead of me in public popularity, and if he succeeds, so many more chances will there be of success for this new claimant."

"Very likely!"

"Well, I must maneuver to beat them both. Now, sir, since you have been in Slab City have you given your name out, publicly, to any extent?"

"No. On the contrary I registered as John W. Smith and niece. I did this for fear that you might be leagued with some desperate gang, and find me, before I could find you. You, alone know me as Harold Henshaw!"

Nabob uttered an exclamation of delight.

"By Jove! It couldn't have been better!" he declared. "The matter will be twice as easy."

"What matter?"

"That of establishing your daughter Helen, as the real heiress. See, now?"

"Ah! but that—"

"Nonsense! There are no buts about it. I marry Helen. Will she welcome me back?"

"I cannot say, as for that. I fancy she is not entirely weaned of her affection for you yet."

"Well, as soon as I mature my plans, I'll spring the scheme, and declare her to be the daughter of John Smith deceased, and by a will he left in my possession she becomes his sole legatee. You are her uncle with whom she had been living, during her father's absence in the Coeur d'Alenes. See?"

"Yes. It is a bold plan!"

"But bound to be successful. It makes Helen an heiress, and the property sure of not being snatched away from us. After she is snug in her position, so that there is no danger of suspicion being aroused, I will have her sign over the property to me, and then marry her."

Henshaw burst into a sarcastic little laugh.

"That would be quite cute, too, now, wouldn't it? You're a very neat schemer, Nabob Ned, as you are called, here, but your cuteness don't pay. You remarry Helen first, or neither of us will have aught to do in abetting you in your plot."

"That is impossible. Why, you could force me to marry her under penalty of exposing my fraud, were I inclined not to keep my promise."

"Perhaps. Well, I will talk it over, with her, and see what she says."

"Do so, and use your influence as much as possible. It would be a shame to lose such a fortune, merely because of personal scruples."

After a few more words, Henshaw sought his apartment, while Nabob Ned, in a cheerful humor hunted up Pedro Sperra, and revealed his plans, even going so far as to trust the Mexican with the secret of his previous sham marriage with Helen Henshaw.

Sperra listened with rapt attention and signified his approval by frequent head-nods.

CHAPTER XI.

POLLY'S DEBUT.

NIGHT came on, and with it a violent rain-storm, so that by an early hour in the evening, the Bung-Eye saloon was packed as full as it could be—the majority of the crowd being those who were eager to hear the beauteous Mlle. Pauline sing.

To those who had not yet seen her, strange stories had gone out, of her wondrous beauty, and the very fact that she "played on a fiddle," as the miners put it, was sufficient to set the town in a state of eager expectancy.

There being no stage, a couple of faro tables had been arranged together, at the further end of the faro room.

A dozen rows of plank seats had been also put in for the benefit of those who wished to pay a dollar for the privilege of sitting down.

These seats were quickly filled, netting Polly a profit of nearly a hundred dollars, thanks to Eagle City Ed's good arrangements.

The remainder of the audience was forced to accept accommodations in the rear, and see the best they could.

It suited many of the roughs, as they were adjacent to the bar, where they could both hear and drink.

Eight o'clock came.

It was the hour fixed for the arrival of Mlle. Pauline, upon the stage, and promptly at the appointed time, she and Eagle City Ed made their bow.

"Allow me, gentlemen," Ed said, before seating his fair protegee, to introduce to you, Mlle. Pauline Smith, the daughter of your former citizen, John Smith. With your kind attention she will favor you with some instrumental and vocal music. The first will be a selection from that charming opera, 'The Bohemian Girl.'

He and Polly then became seated amid a storm of applause, and when it had subsided somewhat, Polly touched the strings in an extemporized prelude, bringing forth an exquisite strain that instantly caused an intense and appreciative silence on the part of the audience.

The player then struck into the melody of the opera, giving it in a most exquisitely artistic manner, the music penetrating to every part of the room then dying softly away to a faint, weirdly-beautiful tone that seemed to die in the distance.

At the conclusion of the solo the applause was so tumultuous that a repetition of the latter measure of the piece was necessary to secure anything like order.

Men, old and young, stamped their heavy-booted feet, yelled and waved their hats high in the air, while gold coin and little pouches of dust rained upon the stage in a shower!

It was a reception such as Polly had never ex-

perienced or dreamed of and she felt only too pleased to respond to the *encore*.

She then sung a plaintive home ballad which was listened to with rapt attention, bringing moisture to the eyes of more than one veteran and tenderfoot, as the words brought back to them recollections of the past.

Among the spectators nearest the stage was Nabob Ned, attired in the highest of fashion, and appearing at his ease. His garments were of the best material and fit, and a big diamond glittered upon his spotless shirt-front, while a huge cable gold-chain was worn about his neck, and attached to his watch.

From the moment of Polly's first appearance, his eyes hardly once left her face, and by intuition, she was forced to glance at him several times only to find his steadfast gaze fixed upon her.

She scarcely knew whether to feel pleased or offended, but made up her mind to call Eagle City Ed's attention to the matter after the performance.

At the end of the second ballad the Chinese waiter presented Polly with a handsomely-arranged basket of wild flowers, which had been formed in colors to represent a star.

Although Polly felt almost certain that Nabob Ned was the donor, she gave him no look to indicate that she thought so; but, on receiving the flowers, courtesied, placed them upon a stand between her and Ed, and immediately sung the third number of her programme.

Ed then arose and announced that there would be an intermission of ten minutes, to give the audience an opportunity to "oil up," and he and Polly retired behind a curtained space that had been provided as a retiring room—Polly taking along the basket.

"Oh! haven't I had a nice reception?" she said, inhaling the fragrant odor of the flowers. "I am so delighted, and I am so much indebted to you, sir, for you have been the direct cause of it."

"By no means. You have done splendidly, I will admit. What with the seat rent and voluntary donations, I have over a hundred and eighty dollars, and a few more songs will, no doubt swell the amount to over two hundred dollars."

"And oh! look here, Mr. Ed—a hundred dollar bill hidden among these flowers!"

It was, true enough—a new crisp hundred dollar note that had hitherto received but little, if any usage.

She handed it to Ed, who without a word, gave it a minute examination.

While he was thus engaged, Polly slyly extracted a written note, from among the flowers, and slipped it into her pocket. Looking toward Eagle City Ed, she found him regarding her, amusedly.

"Oh! you need not be so sly. I have no desire to see that note," he laughed. "I'd advise you to avoid the man who sent it, as much as possible."

"Thank you. I do not yet know the contents, and so cannot say what I will do. Who was the gentleman, who sent the flowers?"

"The swell who attracted your attention. If you had looked sharp, you might have noticed a little discoloration under his left eye, although he had it well painted over. I had occasion to do, to-day, what I may do again, if he gets too fresh!"

He then turned his attention to counting the money over again.

She had a woman's intuitive shrewdness, and quickness of perception; so stepped to his side, and laid one hand upon his shoulder.

"Now, Mr. Ed, you are not jealous, are you? I don't want you to be, I am sure."

"Jealous?" and he looked up at her in surprise. "Why, believe me, that is a thing furthest from my thoughts. Here is the money. Now, excuse me a moment, please. I will be back before you go on again."

And he stepped out among the audience, leaving a little unpleasant feeling tugging at her heart. It wasn't exactly a pain, but a sort of gnawing sensation, that caused her to wonder if it would not be herself who would be jealous, had she any cause to be.

If so, she must like him very much!

During his absence, she read the note, it occurring to her that he had absented himself, in order to give her the opportunity to peruse it.

It was as follows:

"MISS SMITH:—

"DEAR LADY:—Learning, by chance, that you claim to be the daughter of John Smith, Esq., deceased, whose appointed representative I am, I take the liberty of bestowing upon you a token of my esteem for you, from the fact of having been Mr.

Smith's friend. I would also respectfully request you to call upon me at my new office, opposite the hotel, at ten, to-morrow, as there are matters of business awaiting the attention of Mr. Smith's heirress.

"I also consider it my duty, to advise you to have very little confidence in the man who publicly announces himself as your manager, as, in reality, he is unworthy of your slightest notice—is a very disreputable character.

"The charges against him are numerous, to say nothing about his being a moral leper. 'Tis said he has two wives living; but, however this may be, I have reasons to believe that one of them is *en route* for Slab City now, in search of him. A word to the wise is sufficient. Most respectfully yours,

"NABOB NED,
Conveyancer, Counselor, etc."

Polly's cheeks grew red and white by turns, as she read the missive, and she was extremely nervous, when Eagle City Ed returned.

At first, she was tempted to thrust the letter before his gaze; but, on second thought, she concluded that the *denouement* resulting from such an act, might detract from the pleasant success of her first appearance; so she picked up her guitar, with a smile.

"Well, is it time, yet?" she asked.

"Yes. Give 'em something serio-comic, this time, to wake 'em up!"

They then went upon the stage, and Polly sung serio-comic songs of the day, to hilarious applause, and more showers of gold.

On *encore*, she sang from "The Barber of Seville" and, to her own surprise, Eagle City Ed joined her, in a rich powerful barytone voice. The execution was exceptionally fine, the sport proving, beyond a doubt, that his musical training, at some time in the misty past, had not been neglected, while Polly found it a keen pleasure, to sing with him.

At the conclusion they both bowed themselves off the stage, amid the most deafening applause, after which Ed reappeared, and announced that Mlle. Pauline would reappear the next evening.

When he returned to the primitive green-room Polly seized his hands in hers impulsively.

"Oh! wasn't it glorious!" she asked, looking up into his face with her starry eyes. "I could have sung right along all night with you, you sing so nicely. I see you have been educated in music. Were you ever abroad?"

"Oh, no! What smattering of music I have is all self-learned. I am glad my effort pleased you. If you desire to retire to your room, there is a back stairway that will lead you to it. Here also is a revolver. In these rough towns a lady should never be without one, nor hesitate to shoot whenever occasion requires. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

She threw her arms about his neck and imprinted a kiss upon his cheek.

Then she was gone.

It was done so quickly that it really took him several moments to comprehend what had occurred—by which time Polly was up-stairs and in her apartment.

"Stuck!" was the first comment the astonished sport made. "Here's a case—a clear translucent case. She's clear gone on me, and Nabob Ned can send her all the flowers he wants, for all the good it does *him*!"

As for Nabob Ned, he left the saloon immediately after the performance, gnashing his teeth with rage.

The last act on the programme, and the fact that Polly had failed to look at him at all, after receiving the bouquet, was like gall and wormwood to him, and he left the Bung-Eye in a furious passion.

"Curse the girl! Curse Eagle City Ed! Curse everybody! I'd like to kill every mother's son of 'em! The girl's a beauty. Egad! I would give a mint to possess her, and possess her I will, though Satan and his imps may stand in my way! I wonder if she got my letter? If so, she disdained to pay any attention to it. Ha, curse her! That but fires me with greater determination to possess her. She may be stuck on him because the devil can sing. I can't sing, but I can outwit 'em all in scheming. Ah! my brain! It is in a whirl. I must compose myself, or I shall not be able to do the work ahead of me."

"Then you had better take a little liquor as a tonic!" a voice exclaimed, and, like an omen of evil, Sperra, the Mexican, stepped alongside the arch-plotter.

"Ah! you?" Nabob hissed, his tone not indicating whether he was pleased or not. "Give me the whisky, if you have any."

Sperra produced a flask, which his newly-acquired master nearly drained of its contents.

It was then returned to the owner, and the Nabob said:

"I am glad you have come. I have business for you. Were you at the Bung-Eye to-night?"

"You bet!"

"What did you think of her?"

"A rare flower, blooming among cactus-thorns."

"She is the same you saw in Spokane?"

"Without a doubt."

"She is a beauty, as you intimated, Pedro Sperra, and I dote on beauty. She shall be mine!"

Sperra smiled a purely Mexican smile—half-satanic, half-derisive.

"Bravely spoken, senor! But I fear that another may have something to say about that."

"Bah! Curse him! I shall meet him in duel, and take his life, to-morrow at ten o'clock. I am a dead-shot with the revolver. I also meet the girl to-morrow, and propose to give her the estate if she will marry me. If she accepts, all well and done. If she refuses, you are to kidnap her to-morrow night."

"I kidnap her?"

"Exactly. You can do it easily by following plans I shall arrange."

"Where will I take her?"

"To a place I will show you, all in good time. Mum's the word, now, and await the issues of my plots and plans. I've much to do before I sleep this night, you can bet!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE ACCUSATION.

The next day dawned bright and auspicious. The storm of the night before had freshened up everything, and the warm, bright sunshine seemed to rest on every one and everything with a sense of cheerfulness.

The forenoon was one destined to be marked down in the calendar as eventful—at least for Slab City.

As early as eight o'clock it was asserted that a man named Cranston had struck it "terrific rich," having located an immense ledge of gold-bearing rock on a claim he had lately purchased of Nabob Ned, not far in the rear of the "Bung-Eye," on the mountain-side.

This set the town wild, and a rush was made for a look at the "find."

The report was then confirmed. Part of an extensive ledge had been unearthed, and proved to be richly impregnated with gold. The yield would be fifteen hundred dollars, if a cent, said old and experienced miners.

The future of Slab City was now assured beyond a doubt, and, wild with enthusiasm over his luck, Cranston invited the denizens to drink his success over the Bung-Eye bar.

Did they?

They did, and without a murmur of dissent, and Cranston's bill was big enough to make him wince.

But what the difference, as long as the future of Slab City as the boss camp of the Cœur d'Alene country was assured?

Just opposite the Bung-Eye Nabob Ned had erected a one-story shanty office, provided with a desk and safe, and when he took possession, early in the morning, he found plenty of business on his hands.

Not exactly because of the boom created by the new discovery, but from the fact that a card in his window bore the following announcement:

"GOLD EXCHANGE!

"To-day:—\$110 in Paper for \$100 in Gold."

As paper money was a commodity largely unknown in the young metropolis, those who had a hundred dollars worth of the glittering "root" hastened to convert it into greenbacks, receiving in each instance a hundred-dollar and a ten-dollar note.

At about half-past nine, however, Nabob Ned closed the office, and went out upon the rugged street, where he met Harold Henshaw, as if by appointment, and grasped his hand warmly.

"My dear Mr. Henshaw, I am delighted to see you, this morning. I suppose you have heard of the new discovery of gold, and the great excitement that prevails? Why, bless you, sir, Slab City will have ten thousand population inside of a year. And, just think of the money that goes jingling into our pockets! I dare say you made arrangements with Heler, satisfactorily?"

"So far, yes. But what is this I hear about sending the rival claimant a basket of flowers?"

Nabob laughed merrily.

"How gossip does carry the news! To be

sure I sent the flowers, together with a note to Miss Smith, requesting an interview with her. I intend to get into her favor sufficiently, so that it will be an easy matter to abduct her if she attempts to interfere."

"Ah! I see. A good plan. I am afraid we shall have trouble in the matter, that would implicate us all. However, I have talked with Helen, and she is willing to become a party to the scheme, depending upon it that you will remarry her, when it succeeds. If you then refuse, she will humiliate herself to become avenged upon you, by a full exposure—and you may guess what that would mean for you, in a town like this—the rope."

"She, nor you, need entertain the least fear that I will be inconstant to my promise. And, now, what work is done must be done quickly. If we get our iron in the fire first, we are sure to win the first heat, don't you see? One of my main objects is to hurt the character of this Eagle City Ed, in order to decrease his fast-growing popularity. Once he is out of favor with the people, it will be smoother sailing."

"What do you propose to do?"

"This: Within an hour, I shall challenge him, to meet me at thirty paces, with pistols. Just before we are to fight Helen is to rush from the hotel, throw her arms around his neck, and call him her truant husband, and yell and scream, and beseech him to take her back, and so forth. See? It will create a big sensation, and as he will naturally deny the allegation, the crowd will sympathize with her, and it will hurt him more than anything I can conceive."

Henshaw shook his head.

"I don't believe she will consent to this thing," he said. "It places her in a bad light."

"Pshaw, no! It will do more to establish her in favor here than anything else that could be done. Go talk with her, and have her ready twenty minutes hence. If she refuses, I drop her."

"I will see what can be done," Henshaw said, grimly, and turned away.

"Oh! he'll come to time," the daring young schemer mused, gazing after him. "Now, for the other part of the programme."

Spying Big Boots, the giant, he motioned to him, and the ponderous mass of bone and flesh approached.

"Good-morning!" Nabob accosted. "You, I believe, are a sort of friend of Eagle City Ed, are you not?"

"A durned sight 'nuff more his friend than I am yours," was the gruff response.

"Oh! I presume so. I could not think of doubting that. I have, however, a challenge, here, for your friend, which I want you to convey to him."

He handed the giant a note which he had written, before leaving his office. It read:

"EAGLE CITY ED:—You are a coward and a craven. I hereby challenge you to meet me, fifteen minutes later, in front of the Bung-Eye Hotel, at thirty paces with pistols—the best man to live.

"NABOB NED."

"Ye want me to take this to him?" Big Boots demanded, after taking the liberty to read the note.

"Certainly I do."

"Then, jest take a fool's advice, and go git fitted fer yer wooden overcoat, that's all."

And away strode the Hercules.

Eagle City Ed was sitting in the gaming-room of the Bung-Eye, when the note was handed him, smoking a cigar.

He had as yet moved about, little, that morning, and was at the time cogitating over the subject of a note he had received a short time before from Polly, which ran as follows:

"MR. EAGLE CITY ED:—

"Sir:—It is with cheeks burning with shame that I wish to apologize for what I did last night—an act for which I cannot account myself responsible, as I certainly could not have been in possession of my senses when I did a thing so unbecoming and unladylike. I trust you will accept this explanation, and avoid all allusion to the occurrence in the future.

MISS SMITH."

After receiving that passionate kiss, Ed had certainly passed a sleepless night and arose at daybreak, in the full belief that he was full as much "gone" on the pretty Miss Smith as she was on him; but when he received the note he got considerably mixed up in his conclusions.

And he was in this condition of mind when Big Boots handed him the challenge, and stood grimly waiting for an answer.

Eagle City Ed leisurely opened the note and scanned the few lines, his face scarcely changing expression.

"Tell the sender that I will be there," he said, and resumed smoking his cigar.

Big Boots looked his surprise, as he moved away to deliver the message.

"Durn my Sund'y boots ef thet aire Eagle Ed ain't as game as they make 'em!" he muttered. "He received thet note ther same like et was an inverted ter a ice cream festervel. His jaw never drapped once."

He returned the answer to Nabob Ned, who was pacing to and fro outside the hotel, and in three minutes afterward half the town knew that Eagle City Ed and Nabob Ned were to fight a duel, and a crowd quickly collected at either side of the street.

Working himself into a passion, simply through trying to keep cool, the Nabob paced up and down the street, awaiting his intended victim.

That singular gentleman did not make his appearance until time was up, when he sauntered leisurely into the street.

An audible murmur of applause ran along either line of spectators, and caused Ned to grate his teeth savagely.

"Gents," Eagle City Ed said, smilingly, "I have been challenged to fight yonder individual with pistols, and as I knew your appreciation of fun, I could not do less than accept. You wish to practice with pistols, I believe, Mr. Nabob?"

"I do!" was the curt reply. "We will stand thirty paces apart, and at a signal—one, two, three—begin firing, and continue until one or the other falls. You may select a man to give the word, for no seconds are required. That suits me if it does you."

"Very well; I'm agreeable to almost anything that's fair," Ed replied. "Go ahead and measure off. Your legs are as good as compasses."

A smile was visible on the spectators' faces. Ned's peculiar point was the length and thinness of his lower limbs.

He failed to take a meaning out of Eagle City Ed's remark, but measured off thirty paces from a given point.

"Who will you select for starter?" he demanded fiercely.

"I'll act!" Pedro Sperra cried, stepping forward. "It won't be the first duel I have officiated at. Get ready, gents!"

Neither men objected, but drew their revolvers, and put their left foot forward, with weapons leveled.

"One!" counted Sperra, in a ringing tone.

"Two!"

Hark! A woman's scream!

And a woman.

She darted from among the crowd in front of the Bung-Eye, and threw herself upon Eagle City Ed, knocking the weapon from his grasp, and then throwing her arms around his neck.

"Oh! my husband—my long-lost truant husband!" she cried, piteously. "I have found you at last—oh! at last. Long and patiently I have hunted you, and thank God, I have at last found you!"

In spite of his struggles she rained kisses upon his cheek, and it was a couple of minutes ere he could free himself, and put her away at arm's length.

"Woman!" he gasped, "are you mad? I'm no husband of yours!"

"You are—you are! and it is useless for you to attempt to deny it. You are my husband, and no power on earth shall ever part us again!"

Eagle City Ed was not only astounded, but horrified beyond measure.

He gazed at the woman, utterly dumfounded.

She was young, well dressed, and pretty of form and face. She was a decided brucette, and her features were those of a person of refinement.

"My dear lady, you have surely made a mistake," Ed once more assured. "It is some other person you are looking for. I was never married in my life!"

"Ha, ha! You would deceive me, but you cannot. Do you suppose I have forgotten you? No, never!"

At this juncture Harold Henshaw rushed forward and caught her by the arm.

"Helen! Helen!" he cried, reprovingly, "what do you mean? Haven't I sworn you should never live with him again as his wife? Come, you foolish child!"

And he half dragged her back into the hotel.

And Polly Smith, standing on the veranda, attired to call on Nabob Ned, heard and saw all, with a sickening sensation gnawing at her heart.

CHAPTER XIII. POLLY'S "POINTER."

WHEN Helen Henshaw was gone Eagle City Ed turned to the crowd nearest him with pallor in his face.

"Gentlemen!" he said, clearly and distinctly, "you have all been witness to the scene just now, and of course are welcome to your own opinions. But as God is my judge, I never saw that young woman before. There are but two ways about it. She is either insane or else a job has been put up to injure me. I presume I can point out the instigator!"

He turned his angry gaze toward where Nabob Ned had stood a few minutes before; but that worthy was nowhere to be seen, and on inquiry, no one appeared to know where he had gone.

A smile of contempt curled the sport's lips, when he learned the truth, and he turned to the crowd.

"You see, gentlemen. The so-styled nabob of your camp has moseyed. He evidently knew I would accuse him of putting up the job on me and was afraid of encountering my vengeance. Well, let the coward go. He is not worthy of the time of hunting up and killing him. Let's all take something."

Some of the bystanders gave assent, but not all of those present, for many shook their heads significantly, as much as to say—"We don't care to drink with a man as would desert his wife."

Ed was not slow to notice this.

He raised his hat courteously to Miss Polly, as he ascended the steps to the veranda, but she turned her head aside and refused to acknowledge the compliment.

This cut the sport like a knife, and he knew, too, that she was justified in doing as she had done, if, indeed, she had witnessed the street scene.

Half an hour later another of Cupid's wicked shafts pierced his heart, when he became the recipient of the following worded note:

"MR. EAGLE CITY ED:—

"SIR:—Your services as my manager will not be required any longer during my stay in Slab City. Thanking you for past favors, I am, sir,

"Respectfully, etc.,

"PAULINE SMITH."

Ed was writing in a pocket memoranda at the time he received the note, and after he received the missive, he deliberated full an hour and then sent back the following answer:

"MISS PAULINE:—I accept my discharge, without a word of protest, knowing of course that you are weak-minded enough to believe true what you saw to-day, when it was one of the most infamous conspiracies to ruin me, and I have no doubt but what your flower-gift lover was at the bottom of it. You can accept this at its par value, and believe me,

"Respy yours,

"EAGLE CITY ED."

During the afternoon Polly visited the office of Nabob Ned, and found that genius of schemers alone.

He received her with the greatest courtesy, and after she was seated, said:

"Miss Smith, you have honored me greatly, by calling, and I trust we shall be able to arrange matters so satisfactorily that you will not be forced to sing before the class of audiences that frequent the Bung-Eye Hotel."

"How do you know I am forced to do so?" Polly retorted. "For all you know I may do it as a preference."

"Ah! yes, but then, you know, I drew the inference that the occupation was not congenial to one with your refined tastes."

Polly simply smiled.

"Perhaps not," she answered. "But I did not come here to discuss my likes or dislikes. You wrote me you wished to see me on business concerning my deceased father's estate."

"Exactly, providing we can establish it that you are the daughter of my late lamented employer. To do that, you know, we must have strong proofs—very strong proofs—of your identity."

"As long as you get proofs, why require that they should be so extremely strong?" Polly demanded, sharply.

"For the simple reason that there is another claimant in the field, who has proofs that will be difficult to gainsay."

"Another claimant?" Polly echoed. "Who, pray?"

"Miss Helen Smith, who has documents that would stand fire in any court, to the effect that she is the daughter and only direct heir of John Smith, deceased."

This was startling news to Polly, and she looked dismayed.

"I am sure I don't understand how this can be," she remarked. "Is this other claimant in Slab City?"

"She is, and stopping at the hotel. If you were a witness to the street episode this forenoon, you saw your rival!"

"What! that woman?"

"Exactly."

"Then surely there is a mistake, or else a base imposition is on foot. You say you were my father's clerk?"

"I was John Smith's confidential clerk."

"Did he ever tell you where he had lived before coming here?"

"Yes; at Spokane Falls."

"Ah! that is my home, and the home of my father, as can be easily proven; and, more than that, but one John Smith ever lived at Spokane Falls."

"Just what the rival party says; and, moreover, she has letters from Smith, and other proofs to show that she is the rightful claimant. In fact, I have not the shadow of a doubt but what she is the daughter of my late friend."

"If so, why invite me here?"

"For reasons I will make plain to you; then, too, I wanted to hear what you had to say on the subject. Now, I have served the interests of John Smith faithfully, since his death, with but slight compensation. It was understood between him and me that I should eventually be better rewarded. That reward I naturally expect. The estate, as it stands to-day, is worth a fortune, and I can, in a measure, be thanked that it is so, for I have held back from making many sales until a boom should start, which has at last come. To-day the estate will sell for a hundred thousand dollars cash—tomorrow maybe double as much. Therefore, you will see that I have no little responsibility on my hands."

"In regard to this other claimant, she is a person in whom I have not the slightest confidence, and I believe, were she to come into this princely property, she would wholly forget that I am entitled to any compensation for my services. Therefore, I am averse to seeing her rolling in this wealth, whether or no she is the right heiress. There is just one kink—one small opening by which I can prevent her from taking possession of the property, and that is all!"

"What is it?"

"It is a secret that I am justified in using to protect my own interests, and therefore I cannot give it away."

"Indeed? Well, sir, from what you have said am I to infer that you have power to make me heiress to this property, whether I was the rightful one or not?"

"Exactly. I have it in my power to put you in the place, or the other one. It is therefore a matter of choice and circumstances. I am not a worldly or a mercenary man, but I mean to have some reward for my services."

Polly gazed at him, keenly.

At times he was really a fine and honest-looking fellow, and just at this particular moment, one of the aforesaid times was upon him.

And Polly wondered if there was really treachery, deceit and villainy under that mask of such blandness.

"What sum of money do you propose to demand?" she asked, "as an issue of your interesting game?"

"To make Helen Smith the heiress, I shall demand the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars, and one-third interest in the property."

"And, in my case?"

"Your hand and heart, in marriage, and a husband's equal interest with a wife, in the estate—a peaceful, quiet and pleasant life, such is even more precious than all the world's gold and diamonds."

"Sir! I did not come here to make terms of that order."

"Oh! I'm aware you didn't. But from the moment I first saw you, I loved you."

Polly laughed, outright.

"Such protestations sound well enough when you read them in story books," she said, "but they hardly stand test in this life we lead."

"Mine will. I love you truly and devotedly, and it is only since I have become aware of the fact that I have formed the idea of working you in as the heiress. You *may* be the real one, but, were I to express my candid opinion, I should feel in duty bound to give it in favor of the other claimant. Become my bride, and I will not only make you the heiress, but be one of the most devoted of husbands to you."

"And, if I refuse, you will go over to the other party?"

"Certainly!"

"Then, let me settle the matter right here,

sir. I am perfectly well satisfied that I can furnish sufficient proof to the people, of who and what I am, to gainsay all your boasted power and authority in the matter. So let me tell you, now, and for good, that I wouldn't wed a man of your unscrupulous character under any circumstances whatever. I defy your power the same as I scorn your protestation of love. Good day, sir!" and with the hauteur of a queen, she swept from the office, leaving Nabob Ned in a rage bordering on insanity.

The day passed without further incident—Nabob Ned keeping closely to his office, partly through his exchange business, and partly through fear to make himself conspicuous, for he felt sure he would have trouble with Eagle City Ed.

Just at the edge of evening, he sent for Pedro Sperra, and the Mexican promptly made his appearance at the office.

He saw by Nabob's face that something had gone wrong, and suspected what it was, having seen Polly leave the office.

"I want you!" the plotter announced, opening the conversation. "The work I spoke of must be done to-night!"

"What! kidnapping the girl? She didn't come to time, eh?"

"No. She is unmanageable. Immediately after the concert, or, whenever is safest, you are to secure her, and take her to a place I will show you."

"Can't do it alone!"

"Nonsense."

"Nothing of the kind. You'll have to help me."

"Impossible. My hand must be silent."

"Then, I can arrange it. There's a tried and true Mexican pard of mine, just arrived here, broke, and a ten-dollar note will buy him, soul and body, and he can be depended on. His name is Daglos."

"Are you positive he can be trusted?"

"I'll stake my life on it. You know I am working for half of this fortune, and I can't afford to do otherwise than what's to our mutual interests."

"True. Well, get this fellow, and come here, an hour later. I'll then show you where to fetch the girl. Mind, in doing this I am going to let you into some important secrets, and die you will if you breathe a word of them!"

"Rest easy. You can depend upon me and Daglos. Mexicans are treacherous only when starved."

"Well, be off. It will be dark, in an hour—then, pass by here, toward Smith's cabin and I will directly join you. Here is fifty dollars for you!"

Sperra accepted it, and was off.

"The plant is developing rapidly," Nabob muttered, to himself. "After the girl is out of the way, and old Henshaw and his daughter too, I shall be monarch of all I survey!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SECRET EXPLODED.

An hour later, Pedro Sperra and another man passed the office. This companion was also a Mexican, to all intents, for he was attired in Mexican garb, in a greasy and ragged condition, and his features were swarthy, such parts as were not covered with a heavy jet beard.

He was a villainous-looking chap, as, indeed, most vagabond Mexicans are, and evidently was fitted for transactions of a dark nature.

The twain had nearly reached the Smith cabin ere they were overtaken by Nabob Ned.

The schemer gave Daglos a single sharp glance, and was evidently satisfied with Sperra's selection.

"I'll show you the place, now," he said.

"Follow me, and say nothing, and I will make all the explanations necessary."

The Smith cabin did not stand out in the gulch, like the other structures of Slab City, but was built about one foot and a half, from the rocky wall of the mountain-side. The space between the outer log wall of the cabin and the rock was not over the above-mentioned width; hence, no one would have thought of crowding into the contracted fissure.

The face of rock, along the passage was singularly smooth.

When near the cabin door, Nabob Ned said:

"I suppose you, like all the others, have been mystified by the ghost business. I will explain it to you, because old Smith reposes quietly in his grave. The door-sill of that cabin is a piece of ingenious mechanical work, that produces the ghost. Beneath the cabin is a shallow cellar, reaching to the door-sill.

"A close examination of the door-sill will re-

veal that there is a crack in it half an inch wide, or more properly speaking, there are two strips of board that form the sill, the slit being between them. A match dropped through the slit, will descend into the cellar. Well, when it is desirous to have old Smith's spirit appear, a man with a mechanical invention embodying some of the principles of the stereopticon lantern, turns light on his machine, which is in the cellar, and the ghost quickly appears, and can be made to disappear, by turning off the slide light. The ghost rarely appears except when some one contemplates laying for it all night, and is designed to frighten people away from the vicinity. I originated it."

With a laugh of satisfaction at his own unscrupulous cunning, the scamp then led the way around to the rear narrow passage.

"It is tight squeezing, but you can make it," he said. "Follow me."

They did so, and when half-way along the cabin wall, suddenly came to an opening in the rock, sufficiently large to admit the trio abreast.

Here a halt was made, and Nabob Ned lit a pocket lantern.

Sperra and his companion were then able to see that the passage ran back some distance into the mountain. Human hands had not hewn it out, it was a piece of nature's own handiwork.

Nabob now led the way, his two tools following.

For fifty or more feet they proceeded, and then turned abruptly and entered a huge circular cavern, with high vaulted ceiling, from which pended grotesque drippings of rock.

In the center of the cavern was a greenish pool of water, while at one side was a brilliant light—a vein of natural gas from a fissure in the wall, supplying it!

Near this light were tables and desk-like arrangements, which contained tools of various descriptions, and upon one of the tables was a peculiar design of portable printing press.

Two men, well dressed, and wearing half-masks, were at work at the tables, apparently engaged in engraving upon stone.

"Here is where you are to bring the girl, Nabob announced. "Those two men are counterfeiters, in my employ, and execute work that few persons can tell from the genuine. Perhaps you can now understand why I can give \$1.10 in greenbacks, for a dollar in gold."

"You are certainly a deeper rascal than I gave you credit for being," Sperra declared.

At this juncture, one of the counterfeiters approached where they had halted.

"Jack!" the plotter said; "these two fellows are to bring a girl here, to-night. I will probably be here when they arrive, but, should I not, they will guard her till I come. They're all right."

"Correct, captain. How about the stuff? Did it go?"

"Like hot cakes! I changed a thousand for gold, to-day. Will make a shipment to-morrow. That's all."

The man bowed and went back to his bench.

"We'll go, now. Secure the girl as soon after the performance as possible, and bring her here and await me, if I am not already here."

"All right! You can depend that the girl's ours this night!"

They left the cavern, and Nabob entered the camp in advance of Sperra and Daglos.

In fact, they did not enter the camp proper, but halted on the outskirts, and stood gazing at each other.

Daglos was the first to speak.

"Pedro Sperra!" he said, in a tone that one would have regarded as stern, "to-night you and I balance accounts."

Sperra started and a look of terror entered his eyes.

"Why, have I—"

"Stop!" the other commanded. "I am doing the talking for this occasion. A year ago to-night I foiled you in an attempt to rob and murder me for what money I had on my person. You plead for mercy, on the ground of starvation, and I gave you a year's lease of life, providing you served me faithfully. Have you done so?"

The Mexican drew himself up proudly.

"That is not for me to say!" he replied, calmly. "Dozens of times could I have driven a dagger into your heart while you slept during this year of sleuth-hound business you have led me through—dozens of times, the devil has tempted me to do so, but yet I am not guilty. You are the judge!"

The hand of Daglos went out, warmly.

"Sperra, you have served me better than I could ever have hoped. Especially in this trail for Ned De Wolf have you served me faithfully

and shrewdly. No professional detective could have filled your place better. Shake!"

The Mexican seemed overjoyed, and the two shook hands, heartily.

"The matter ends to-night. The trap is ready for springing, thanks to Nabob Ned's confidence in you."

"Have the Secret Service agents arrived?"

"Yes. They came on to-night's stage, and I have only to make the arrest. Now, let's go back and find Big Boots, and then scoop in the two counterfeiters."

Of course the counterfeiters got "scooped!"

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

FEELING jubilant over the prospective success of his plans, Nabob Ned sought the Bung-Eye, and approached a table where two well-dressed, decidedly Eastern-looking gentlemen were playing a social game of poker.

"Do you object to a third party, gentlemen?" he asked, when the hand was over. "I have a few minutes and a few dollars to throw away."

"Certainly not," the elder of the two answered. "Anything to make it interesting; although, in poker, we don't usually play to any particular limit."

"Oh, I'm not particular. I can stand a moderate bluff."

The first game was dull; the stake of thirty dollars was raised ten, and taken in by the younger gent from the East.

The next deal, each man discarded two and took two.

Their hands now appeared to give them satisfaction.

"I think I see a hundred dollars in this hand!" Nabob Ned said triumphantly.

"Do you?" replied the younger Easterner, whom his companion called Johnson.

"Well, I'll have to see you and go you a hundred better!"

Both stakes went bang down upon the table.

"Now, Packard," said Johnson, "we will hear from you."

"I drop out!" Packard answered, throwing down his hand. "You gents can fight it out."

There was now, altogether, three hundred and thirty dollars in the pot.

Nabob Ned laid his cards, face down, upon the table, and drew from his vest pocket, a roll of crisp new one-hundred-dollar bills. While he was engaged in counting the amount the two Easterners exchanged significant glances.

"I have here twenty-two hundred dollars upon the pot," he said, tossing the bills upon the table. "Do you raise it?"

"No! but I cover it," Johnson said, throwing down a wad of notes, the outer one being a five-hundred-dollar-note. "Now, sir, what have you got?"

"Four kings!" Nabob cried, triumphantly turning up his hand, and reaching for the stakes.

"But, hold!" Johnson cried, thrusting a revolver before the villain's eyes. "I happen to hold four little one-spots, you know," and he laid down four aces sure enough!

Nabob arose from the table with a growl.

"Then, you've won," he said. "The devil always favors his own."

And he stalked off.

"The devil has been favoring that rascal a long time," Packard remarked, "but he won't favor him, after to-night, I judge."

At eight o'clock, the saloon was well filled, and Mlle. Pauline made her appearance.

Eagle City Ed was not with her, and murmurs of disappointment were heard on either hand.

Nor did the little songstress look vivacious, as on the previous night. She was pale, and there was noticeably not the same spirit in her songs.

Nabob Ned occupied the same position, as on the previous night, but Polly did not look at him. Her gaze roved over the sea of faces, in quest of the face of Eagle City Ed.

But he was not present.

Immediately after Pauline had retired from the stage, there was a surging of the crowd, and almost before he was aware of it Nabob Ned found himself confronted by Harold Henshaw and his daughter.

Henshaw, too, grasped a cocked revolver.

"Edward Landis!" the man from Silver Cliff cried. "I have come to you to force you to make reparation for the wrong you did my daughter. Helen has refused to act out the lie she attempted to-day, and as soon as she is lawfully married, even though you be a criminal, we are going back to Silver Cliff and she shall

have a divorce from you. Do not utter a word of protest. Instead of being Eagle City Ed's wife, as you plotted to have her represent herself, she shall become your wife. You married her falsely once!"

"This is false! This is an outrage!" Nabob Ned protested. "You tried to foist this woman off on one man and failed, and now you think to make me your victim? Never!"

"Then, you die!" Henshaw declared, with emphasis. "Either you marry my daughter whom you wronged or you die where you stand."

"Listen, gentlemen!" Helen Henshaw cried, turning appealingly to the crowd. "This is no attempt at blackmail. A year ago, this man, Edward Landis, won my affection, and we were, as I believed, married, during my father's absence. The marriage, however, turned out to be a sham, but Landis had fled and deserted me. We pursued him here, when he promised to marry me if I would become a party to his vile scheming. At first I was weak enough to consent; but now that I have got my senses, I refuse to do his will. The girl who sings here is the real heiress of John Smith, yet this man proposed to defraud her by substituting me in her place. He also caused me to perpetrate the falsehood, this morning, of declaring Eagle City Ed to be my husband. I swear to you I never saw the man before."

At this a ringing cheer of "bravo!" went up, and Polly, behind the curtain, trembled with joy as she heard the calumny raised from the sport's name and character.

"Now, gentlemen, all that we want is that this man be forced to remarry me, and lift dishonor from my name. Then he can go whither he pleases."

"Hurra! Boyees, et's a go!" a miner cried. "Form a big ring, and trot the Nabob inter it. He has got ter do ther squar' thing, or we'll skin him alive."

The ring was formed, and the villain, seeing that sentiment was strong against him, dared not refuse to enter it and take his place beside Helen.

His face was very pale; but his inward rage was terrible.

Slab City happened to boast of a lawyer, and this worthy was called upon and the legal knot was tied.

Then Harold Henshaw said:

"Now, sir, you are at liberty to go whither you please. We return to Silver Cliff by next stage." Then he and Helen left the ring.

As they did so, four other persons stepped into it, and three pairs of revolvers, were leveled at the schemer and scamp.

The party were, respectively, Eagle City Ed, Pedro Sperra, and Messrs. Johnson and Packard.

"Edward de Wolf, alias Landis, alias Heaven only knows how many other names, I arrest you by authority of the law of this Territory, coupled with that of the United States," the sport cried. "Do not attempt to resist, or you will be shot down like a dog, for we are here to take you, dead or alive!"

The villain uttered a fearful curse, and staggered back against the wall, white as death. He saw that retribution had overtaken him at last.

"On what charge, and by what power do you arrest me?" he gasped, seeing no avenue of escape.

"On the charge of counterfeiting money in half a dozen States and Territories. Sperra and myself have been on your trail for a year, and at last we have got you. I arrest you on the authority of being a detective in the employ of the Government. Throw down your weapons and surrender peaceably!"

There was nothing else to do and the crest-fallen Nabob permitted himself to be made a prisoner, then was taken in charge by Messrs. Packard and Johnson, and removed from the Bung-Eye.

Mlle. Pauline did not reappear that night, realizing by the noise that Eagle City Ed was quite the hero of the hour.

The next day, at her request, they had a private interview, and Ed was prevailed upon to remain in Slab City long enough to arrange her business affairs.

This he succeeded in doing in a week's time, and Polly found herself a rich and much admired heiress instead of a saloon-singer.

Every one liked her and not one objection was raised to her taking possession of John Smith's prosperous estate, which was daily increasing in value.

When she was securely installed, Eagle City Ed announced his intention of going South.

As yet, no word of love had passed between them; but when he had made known his purpose to depart, woman-like she was the weaker of the two, and begged of him to stay; and he did so.

This marriage, too, was one of the events of Slab City life, and there was a big demonstration in honor of it.

Nabob Ned and his two confederates received long and severe sentences.

The Henshaws returned to Silver Cliff, and were heard of no more.

As for Sperra, he and Big Boots are now full-fledged detectives, and doing some good work.

Meanwhile, Ed and Polly live in Slab City, as happy as the day is long!

THE END.

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